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THE THREE MAJOR NOVELS OF MIGUEL ANGEL  
ASTURIAS: A STUDY IN FICTIONAL METHOD

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## SUMMARY

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1. THE CRITICS. Despite the award of the Nobel Prize to Miguel Angel Asturias in 1967, he appears to have gone into decline with the rise of the nueva novela latinoamericana. Emir Rodríguez Monegal's influential but negative view in "Los dos Asturias" ignores several important points already raised by G.Yepes-Boscán's "Asturias, un pretexto del mito". Asturias' two major innovations are a functional incorporation of Latin American myth allied to audacious experimentation with language, and these are the acknowledged central features of the "new" novel. El Señor Presidente and Hombres de maíz together prefigure all the varied manifestations of the nueva novela, an example of which is Asturias' own Mulata de tal.

2. THE WRITER. Asturias is not himself a literary theorist, and has never acted either as critic of his own fiction or as its propagandist. He is usually considered a disorganised, inspirational writer; yet, although he does not carefully "plan" his novels in advance, he bases them on a previously conceived central situation, or hecho central, which "automatically" determines the novel's development towards a completed pattern. This technique may be called the creative synthesis.

3. "EL SEÑOR PRESIDENTE". The novel is a system of polarities reconciled through a complex series of poetic correlations. In examining and actualising the situation in Guatemala under Estrada Cabrera's dictatorial regime, Asturias constructs a prose poem on various levels flowing into a central dualism based on his characteristic real-

unreal distinction. The novel alternates continuously between emotive and rational visions of its hecho central, and thereby succeeds in reproducing the divorce between perception and conceptualisation in modern existence. The central character, Cara de Angel, becomes the central motif of a mosaic closely uniting moral and aesthetic concerns. In the absence of a true mythical substratum, the dictator becomes a legend, and the collective unconscious of each individual character becomes the fragmentary "past" in which he resides, whilst Cara de Angel constitutes the pool of consciousness wherein the varied currents of the novel take their most precise and definitive form.

4. "HOMBRES DE MAIZ". The first half of the novel is essentially an exposition of a semi-mythical, purely Indian reality, as the descendants of the Maya come into conflict with the Ladino representatives of modern civilisation. Part VI, the second half, reveals the effect of this legendary past upon the now partly Westernised Indians of modern Guatemala through the figures of Nicho Aquino (collective unconscious) and Hilario Sacayón (consciousness). Part VI is thus the pool into which the earlier currents flow. The structure is determined by the gradual association of its central male and female figures with the earth and the rain, respectively, which together produce the maize of which the Maya believed man to be made.

5. "MULATA DE TAL". The subject matter of the novel, cultural conflict, requires a narrative technique quite different from the one employed in the other two novels. In a relatively short work Asturias moulds a vast number of elements taken from all periods of Guatemalan history into a homogeneous whole by means of a technique which is the literary equivalent of the animation process for film cartoons. The novel is both humorous and

violent, highly colourful and almost wholly pictorial, achieving its effects through the flexibility of its language and the power of its author's imagination. These qualities enable Asturias to invent a new approach to character and incident, whilst remaining faithful to his earlier work and concerns.

6. CONCLUSION. Asturias' fictional method tends to produce not the kind of relatively loose development which is usual in the novel, but a continuous and controlled evolution of interlocking parts, of major and minor motifs, which at plot level is determined by the possible thematic links between incidents and between facets of character, and at sentence level by the possible links between words, effected through imagery. Asturias' close understanding of the relation between consciousness and the unconscious in the human mind allows him in El Señor Presidente and Hombres de maíz to build psychic constructs corresponding to the Europeanised life of the ciudad and the essentially Indian life of the campo in modern Guatemala. Where each of those two novels builds a mind, Mulata de tal builds a culture, the syncretic culture which has evolved from the clash of those two minds across the ages. It may confidently be predicted that Asturias' fiction is destined for triumphant reassessment.

## PREAMBLE

The last four years or so have seen a revolution in the study of Miguel Angel Asturias. Unfortunately, as usually happens with revolutions, the initial result has been to confuse a situation which, however unsatisfactory, was at least clear and easy to understand. No lasting definition of his role in the development of Latin American literature in this century has yet appeared, which is natural. Nevertheless, critics are now slowly beginning to align themselves in one of two central camps, and attitudes seem to be polarising around these critical nuclei, one of which may be called negative, the other more positive. Despite agreement with the second of the two views in general terms, the present study argues from the assumption that neither those who are for Asturias nor those who are against him have yet approached his work head on: neither group has really got to grips with the fundamental mechanisms of his technique. It is believed that these basic approaches to fictional creation mark Asturias off unmistakably as one of the key figures in the literature of Latin America in this century. New means of access are urgently required at a time when Asturias appears to have fallen into obsolescence with the rise of the nueva novela latinoamericana; it will be suggested that before Asturias is buried beneath the mass of criticism now appearing in response to the new novel a great deal of work has still to be done.

The first chapter is concerned with the views held by critics, and the kinds of general approach that have been used up to the present time. The second chapter considers Asturias' own often contradictory statements about literature in general and about his own literary method. There then follow three individual studies of what are taken to be Asturias' three major achievements: El Señor Presidente, Hombres de maíz, and Mulata de tal. Little enough work has

been devoted to this author's style, and even less to his fictional method in general. It is argued that although style is of the utmost importance in any critique of Asturias, it should not overshadow the examination of his narrative technique as a whole, a technique which tends constantly towards unity through stylistic devices which mirror the deeper structure of each novel. This study attempts to view the one aspect in terms of the other, and thereby to demonstrate a profound unity in conception and execution which has not yet been recognised in Asturias' work.

The four decisive years for Asturias have been overlapped by the five years which have seen the Latin American novel come to assume a prestige and an importance unimaginable in earlier decades. This is the era of the nueva novela, the time when Latin America has "caught up". Novels like Rayuela, Paradiso, Cien años de soledad, Coronación, Tres tristes tigres, have either appeared for the first time or been fully recognised for the first time on an international scale. In Britain the year of the Parry Report was the year in which Encounter published the special number which marked the first British awareness of the phenomenon, and two editions of the Times Literary Supplement have since been devoted to it. As for Asturias, 1966 saw him awarded the Lenin Prize for Peace, and appointed Guatemalan Ambassador to France, after 12 years in the political wilderness; and in 1967 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Such a bald statement of the facts might seem to suggest that Latin American literature has at last come of age, which is true, and that Asturias is regarded as its leading exponent, which is not. Indeed, this is very far from the truth. Despite the appearance of some of the most perceptive and intelligent articles ever written about his work, and even the odd book or two, Asturias now appears as a figure gone into a deep decline. The reasons for this are complex and not always easily understood, though there is one simplistic but very influential view which must be considered at the start. It means that to put this whole matter into perspective we must start from the present moment, before moving back. And to do this we must begin with the phenomenon of Emir Rodríguez Monegal, the ubiquitous propagandist of the nueva novela latinoamericana.

In his Narradores de esta América (196?) Señor Rodríguez Monegal limits reference to Asturias to a cursory aside. In his article "The New Novelists" (Encounter, September 1965) he again finds no space for him, and relegates him to a footnote. In 1967 Asturias wins the Nobel Prize, the first Latin American novelist to do so, yet in November 1968, in an article for the Times Literary Supplement,<sup>1</sup> Rodríguez Monegal mentions Asturias only to question the merit of his receiving the prize at all. And finally, in 1969, Rodríguez Monegal publishes an article called "Los dos Asturias".<sup>2</sup> Much as the situation is to be regretted, this article must now be the starting point for any comprehensive attempt to gauge the significance of Asturias as a factor in the development of the Latin American novel in this century. It is only the second major attempt (I shall later be discussing the first) to define Asturias' historical importance, and it is certainly the one which will have the greatest effect upon critics and students alike. In general terms, Rodríguez Monegal tries to minimise the relevance of Asturias to what he calls the nueva novela, and to suggest that Asturias has for some fifteen years been an outmoded writer in a rapidly changing era: to suggest, in short, that the Nobel Prize came "twenty years too late".

To those who have followed Rodríguez Monegal's approach to the nueva novela, and to Asturias, through the articles mentioned above, his critical procedure in "Los dos Asturias" will come as no surprise. Indeed, it may logically be argued that no other course was open to him.

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1. "The New Latin-American Literature", TLS (14 November, 1968), pp.1273-74.
  2. Revista Iberoamericana, XXXV, no.67 (Jan-April 1969), pp.13-20.

But it cannot be accepted that a critic should distort the image of a writer solely to maintain his own view of a literature in which he has a personal stake, and the present study cannot get under way without first clearing aside some of the obstacles so recently placed in its path by Rodríguez Monegal. This is in any case probably as good a way of introducing the central questions relating to Asturias' fiction as any other.

It is difficult to resist the impression that part at least of the explanation for Rodríguez Monegal's negative thesis in this article lies outside the realm of criticism as such. Asturias is, as we have seen, a writer with whom he has never much concerned himself, and yet it was Asturias who became the first Latin American novelist to win the Nobel Prize. In some sense it is therefore Asturias who has validated the literary boom to which Señor Rodríguez Monegal has so frequently alluded. Yet Asturias is not one of the "new" novelists. Señor Rodríguez Monegal's reaction to this vexing situation has been to negate Asturias' relevance to the new movement, and to backdate him to the late 1940s, as a distant precursor. One reason for this is obvious. The immediate precursor is not to be Asturias, nor any other writer, but a critic, Rodríguez Monegal himself. It is part of a continuing attempt to take the movement over. By cutting Asturias' influence short at a given moment in time--1956 is the year chosen--Rodríguez Monegal can continue to contemplate the panorama of contemporary Latin American literature as some kind of largely autonomous development, like America before Columbus, whose discoverer was himself.

No writer, no movement, no literature is autonomous. Señor Rodríguez Monegal begs many questions. Setting aside the dubious critical implications of categorising authors and "influences" in quite such neat labelled compartments, the whole basis of his thesis may be questioned.



It cannot be accepted that Asturias' "golden age", or whatever one likes to call it, can be confined within the decade 1946-56, nor can one be satisfied with Señor Rodríguez Monegal's incomplete version of Asturias' contribution to the Latin American literary scene in the twentieth century. Finally, his cavalier dismissal of complex individual novels in a mere word or two must be wholly rejected. It is the old story: the critic holds a certain view of the literature which interests him, and for personal or professional reasons is more concerned to maintain that view, whatever the arguments against it, and however illogical his own reasoning becomes, than to alter it in the light of new evidence.<sup>3</sup>

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3. In "La hazaña de un escritor", Visión, Vol.37, no.2 (18 July, 1969), Rodríguez Monegal assesses the achievement of Gabriel García Márquez in Cien años de soledad, and, given the nature of his comments on Asturias, makes some quite extraordinary statements. His article is, he confesses, inspired by the enormous success of the novel, which he describes as "escandaloso". He remarks that this success is all the more surprising since Cien años de soledad seems at first sight to be a wholly anachronistic novel, not the work of a "new" novelist. Still, as García Márquez is clearly such a novelist, our critic contrives to do what he makes no attempt to do in the case of Asturias, namely search for the fictional novelities which must of course be there. What he finds makes fascinating--and familiar--reading for the student of Asturias, especially in the light of a conversation between Himself and Carlos Fuentes (quoted below, p.21), in which Fuentes remarks that Asturias and Borges are the two great precursors of the modern movement. In the Visión article Rodríguez Monegal also views Borges as one of the two prongs of a new movement, but asserts that together in the other prong, "Juan Rulfo y João Guimarães Rosa estaban indicando en Pedro Páramo (1955) y en Grande Sertão: Veredas (1956), una salida mágica a la novela de la tierra, a la exploración de esos vastos mundos vegetales de la América Latina." (p.30)

This is a piece of flagrant critical dishonesty, for even in "Los dos Asturias" Rodríguez Monegal himself accepts the primacy of Hombres de maíz in this respect. He is prepared to give us different aspects of the true story singly in separate articles, but never the whole story all at once. But there is worse to come. Not only does he not mention Hombres de maíz here, but then

Because El Señor Presidente was published in 1946, and because "lo mejor de las Leyendas resultará incorporado a libros posteriores" (which returns us to a view of literary contents and influences as things to be weighed and measured), Rodríguez Monegal argues that Asturias' decisive decade begins in the year 1946 and ends in 1956, after the publication of Hombres de maíz, Viento fuerte, El papa verde, and Weekend en Guatemala. Now as Señor Rodríguez Monegal is talking about "success", and as all substantial critical recognition and financial reward demonstrably came to Asturias well after 1956, we must assume that he means artistic achievement, and if he does we must beg to differ again. Given that he accepts, in the very article in question, that El Señor Presidente was completed

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goes on disingenuously to demonstrate the novelty and validity of García Márquez' work by singling out Asturias' Banana Trilogy for attack as an example of fictional politicking. Yet everyone knows that the same unfavourable comparison can be made between the Trilogy and Hombres de maíz, including Rodríguez Monegal, for he himself makes it in "Los dos Asturias", where he calls Hombres de maíz a great novel: "En este gran libro no hay límites entre lo real y lo sobrenatural, sus personajes viven simultáneamente el ahora y el ayer y también el futuro." (p.17) This compares interestingly with his view of García Márquez in the Visión article now under discussion, p.30: "Gabriel García Márquez crea en Cien años de soledad un mundo a la vez al margen del tiempo y hondamente enraizado en el tiempo, un mundo de fábula y magia, pero también un mundo totalmente real, suprarrealmente real." What, one wonders, is the difference?

Finally, we might remember one of Asturias' most frequently repeated stories, or self-inventions, the one about himself as a child listening transfixed to the magic tales told him by his grandmother. The story is told again in our next quotation, but by Rodríguez Monegal, and not about Asturias, but Gabriel García Márquez: "En el habla mágica de su abuela habían quedado fijas imborrablemente las coordenadas, reales o imaginarias, poco importa ya, de un pueblo que en la geografía se llama Aracataca pero que para la inmortalidad de la literatura se habrá de llamar, siempre, Macondo. Esa habla que escuchaba el niño asombrado de antes, el mago de hoy la ha convertido en el lenguaje vertiginoso de Cien años de soledad." (p.31)

by 1932, as Asturias says it was, where is the sense in talking about the 1946-56 decade as Asturias' period of true creativity? Or if there is any sense in it, why does Señor Rodríguez Monegal not suggest that Asturias should have won the Nobel Prize in 1956 or 1957, rather than the year he proposes: 1949? It is true that as far as the history of Latin American literature itself is concerned, it is to 1946 that El Señor Presidente belongs; but if we are discussing the creative coherence of an individual writer, as Señor Rodríguez Monegal apparently is at this point, we are forced to place the novel not in the 1940s, but in the 1920s, when it was written, and this makes it contemporary with the Leyendas. Part of Señor Rodríguez Monegal's error lies in his failure to differentiate between the principles for judging a writer as an individual, and the very different criteria by which he is to be reckoned as a force or phenomenon within the literature of his time.

Perhaps the most serious discrepancy, however, and one which shows how little Señor Rodríguez Monegal really knows about Asturias' story, is the assertion that had the prize been awarded in 1949, when Asturias had published his "three most important books", it "would have been unanimously applauded". This is an extremely surprising statement. In 1949 Asturias was scarcely known in Latin America, and none of his books had been translated since Leyendas de Guatemala in 1930. It would be interesting to see published evidence for this claim. Where are all the serious critical studies of El Señor Presidente which might have formed a basis for Asturias' name to be put forward? There are none; and as every critic knows, there are few enough even now. In 1951 Juan Loveluck was moved to complain that El Señor Presidente had passed as just another novel:

Es lástima que esta obra maciza, de verdadero espíritu americano, no haya impresionado más fuertemente a la crítica. Ha pasado casi como una novela más. Los comentarios han sido super-

ficiales, comentarios galantes...<sup>4</sup>

Hombres de maíz, which was published in the very year when Rodríguez Monegal suggests Asturias should have won the prize, has still received virtually no serious study, merely a handful of highly uncritical and generally adverse reviews.

One explanation for this truncated view of Asturias has been offered above. There remains a more obvious factual objection. Recognition in the shape of the Nobel Prize --what it is worth is no more the concern of this study than it was Rodríguez Monegal's--usually comes when a writer has established a more or less estimable body of work long enough before the year in question to allow a certain historical perspective. All critical and historical logic would tend to substantiate this policy. In 1949 Asturias was not widely recognised, nor had he written very much; and of course, even had they heard of him, the gentlemen at the Swedish Academy would have had to move very fast indeed to award the prize substantially on the strength of Hombres de maíz, which Rodríguez Monegal regards as Asturias' best work, for it was published in November of that year. But now we are in the realm of the absurd. It should merely be added that if to award the prize to Asturias in 1967 is an "anachronism", then all critical or historical judgments are inescapably anachronistic, and the journalist's rule of thumb should be our only guide.

Until now we have been playing Señor Rodríguez Monegal's game of viewing Asturias as the best forgotten monument to an earlier age, and we have argued that even if this view could be accepted definitively that would still be no reason

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4. Juan Loveluck, "Sobre una novela de nuestro tiempo", Atenea, XVII, no.310 (Concepción, Chile, April 1951), p.63.

for denying him the prize in 1967. (After all, if he was so well-known and meritorious in 1949, it might fairly be assumed that he, more than anyone, exerted an incalculable influence upon the younger writers now at work on the "new" novel). However, such a view cannot be accepted. If there are two Asturiases, they form part of one writer, and the division, greater or smaller according to the work in question, cannot be established on a chronological basis.

Unfortunately, Rodríguez Monegal's essay, like the earlier articles by him that we have mentioned, is all conclusions and no argument. He most probably wrote it because of an acute awareness of the publicity value of the Nobel Prize, and we can see him reaching for the critical headlines in the very title, "Los dos Asturias". His "proof" of the inferiority of Mulata de tal to Hombres de maíz may be quoted as an example of his reasoning:

En vez de consistir, como Hombres de maíz, en una serie independiente de relatos, vinculados por la misma situación básica y por el préstamo de personajes, Mulata de tal se convierte en una serie infinita, y a la postre tediosa, de variaciones sobre motivos indígenas. (p.17)

And that, apparently, is enough. Despite all the damage it is bound to have done, Rodríguez Monegal's whole thesis is unsubstantiated by any really cogent reasoning, still less by any textual evidence. There is no mention of Mulata de tal's new approach to language and narrative method, and the thousands of readers who made it the best-selling foreign novel in France in 1966 (in the era of the nueva novela, but before the Nobel award) were presumably participants in an extraordinary collective aberration.

If we were to accept 1932 as the year of completion for El Señor Presidente, and if we contrived to demonstrate the originality of Mulata de tal, we should arrive at a much wider view of Asturias' creative span than the ten years conceded by the Uruguayan critic:

1932 El Señor Presidente  
1949 Hombres de maíz  
1963 Mulata de tal

Clearly, it was essential to Rodríguez Monegal's thesis, and to Asturias' exclusion from the contemporary club, not only to forget when El Señor Presidente was written (though he conveniently remembers it again at another point in his argument), but also to dismiss Mulata de tal. And very cursorily dismissed it is, as we have seen. All that can be said is that no critic can dismiss in half a sentence a novel which no one else has yet begun to examine. In any case Rodríguez Monegal's argument is, as we have suggested, transparently inconsistent, and the same facts are used repeatedly to prove quite different things. To substantiate his one-decade-only thesis, he firstly dismisses the Leyendas from consideration on the grounds that their best features will appear again in Asturias' later works; yet he then argues that Asturias should have won the Nobel Prize in 1949 because his three best works--El Señor Presidente, Hombres de maíz and the Leyendas themselves--had been written by then.

Criticism has almost always trailed behind creative writing in Hispanic cultures, and it is distressing to find that the maximum exponent of the so-called "new novel" should, after all, be continuing the tradition. The present study is intended partly to show just why it is that Rodríguez Monegal's negative view of Asturias is unacceptable, and what it is that makes Asturias' three major novels so original and important both in conception and in method.

As far as critics and the history of Latin American literature are concerned, Asturias really arrives on the scene in 1946, though even then El Señor Presidente, which was published in a relatively obscure edition in Mexico City, took some years to gain even moderate recognition in

Latin America, as the above-quoted comment by Loveluck shows clearly enough. He had realised that El Señor Presidente was unlike anything that had appeared before it:

Es indudable que este escritor va por una ruta nueva: él solo va abriéndola con el hacha relampagueante de su ejemplo y de su esfuerzo. Por fin nuestra literatura, la americana, se va sacudiendo un poco, un poco abandonando los viejos caminos. (5)

In further refutation of the Rodríguez Monegal thesis, it is worth noting that Loveluck here writes "va", not "ha ido" or "fue". In other words for Loveluck, in 1951, Asturias' literary development was just beginning, not coming to an end. It can only be regretted that an accident of history prevented Asturias from publishing the novel in the early 1930s. Even so, 48 years after it was started, 38 years after it was completed, 24 years after it at last found publication, and 3 years after its author won the Nobel Prize, there are still only a handful of truly critical and meaningful studies of El Señor Presidente, and these tend to lie buried amidst a mass of eager journalism. Only one critic has attempted to find method in the novel:<sup>6</sup> most of the rest, with their hyperbolic language and unsubstantiated conclusions, provide some interesting examples of reader reaction, but little idea of what Asturias has achieved in the novel. Rodríguez Monegal has now attempted to close this long chapter of errors by producing what he claims is a definitive statement about Asturias, but merely presents a simplistic view which inevitably distorts the picture still further.

It has been shown that Rodríguez Monegal's thesis is highly vulnerable. It fails to stand up to the facts them-

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5. Loveluck, op.cit., p.63.

6. See Carlos Navarro, "The Destruction of Reality in El Señor Presidente" (Ph.D diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1967).

selves, still less to the logical arguments that can be deduced from them. Furthermore, there is implicit in his reasoning an evident corollary, which takes force as soon as the validity of his conclusions is challenged. By inverting his assertion that Asturias is moving backwards we could suggest that El Señor Presidente and Hombres de maíz actually came before their time in many ways, both in their conception and in its technical resolution. It can justifiably be argued that El Señor Presidente was the first truly modern novel to appear in Latin America, the first to sever all connections with what had gone before in the continent. It was also the first to achieve a happy combination of the two separate currents that had previously marked the course of fiction, the aesthetic preoccupation of a novel like Don Segundo Sombra, together with the extraordinary violence and concern with real problems which characterised so much of the literature from, say, Echeverría, through Sarmiento, Gamboa, Azuela, Alcides Arguedas and Icaza. It achieved this synthesis through techniques learned and used in Europe in the 1920s, through a kind of functional vanguardismo. El Señor Presidente implicitly rejects most of the assumptions and practices of the 19th-century novel--which, with the exception of Mallea, was virtually the only kind being written in Latin America as late as 1946--to produce a new narrative method owing much to writers like Joyce, Kafka, Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, etc., and to the various forms of modern poetry which were in vogue in the 1920s and after. But not to any one of them.

No one, indeed, has managed to suggest one or two clear influences which might have had a decisive effect upon Asturias. Valle-Inclán has frequently been mentioned, more so previously than latterly; Quevedo is gaining in strength; Góngora, ironically, can be mentioned in the same breath; French Surrealism in general must be seriously considered, as also, on a specifically American front, must the liberating influences of first Darío and then Neruda; and although



no one made a serious study of it, a token mention is usually made of the pre-Columbian literature which Asturias has read and translated with such enthusiasm. But nobody ever points to one or two individual Latin American novelists who can be regarded as genuine precursors of Asturias in any direct technical sense. Only in subject matter do El Señor Presidente and Hombres de maíz have any relation to earlier novels in Latin America. This makes Asturias an extremely significant figure: indeed, it will be argued that he is perhaps the most significant novelist of the century in the continent, the bridge between the old novel and the new, a writer who succeeded in relating new forms to traditional subject matter, thereby internationalising the novel in Latin America, leaving it free to develop autonomously just as the European novel has always done, but without slavishly imitating European modes.

Ironically enough, however, instead of recognising Asturias' revolutionary approach to the novel, which echoes Darío's renovation of poetry in the Spanish language, critics attempted, and still attempt, to squeeze him into old moulds. Thus El Señor Presidente is a "political" novel, Hombres de maíz a "novel of the land", and they are relegated to the old familiar categories which, incidentally, place them in quite separate classes.<sup>7</sup> Yet what is needed is an analysis of what marks the two off as distinct from other novels written before and after them, of what they have in common. This no one has done. The need to do it now is obvious, as Rodríguez Monegal's "Los dos Asturias" clearly demonstrates. Asturias is not a misunderstood author: he is one whom no one has tried to understand in

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7. Even such an authority as Luis Monguió, "Reflexiones sobre un aspecto de la novela hispanoamericana actual", in Memoria del 5<sup>o</sup> Congreso del Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana (Univ. of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1951), p.93, writes: "El Señor Presidente está dentro de la tradición de la novela política semi-histórica que se revela como uno de los tipos primordiales de la ficción hispanoameri-

the first place. As Rodríguez Monegal proceeds with his specious arguments, pretending that Asturias has already been much discussed and clearly defined, it becomes more than ever clear that the very reverse is true. Like most other critics of Asturias, he is talking in the air. He wraps his package up very neatly and professionally, but when we examine the contents we find there is nothing inside. It was all sleight of hand. By acting, in a critical sense, as though El Señor Presidente and Hombres de maíz have long since been recognised, defined, and confined to the appropriate literary pigeon-hole, Rodríguez Monegal can safely go on to suggest that they should be quietly left there. But our view is that they were never classified or filed at all.

Rodríguez Monegal assures us that had Asturias been awarded the Nobel Prize in 1949, the conferment would have been unanimously applauded. We have already registered our surprise, and will assume that he was able to make such a statement only because he was not in circulation, qua critic, at the time. Someone who was is Juan Loveluck, and we have already seen what he had to say on the matter as late as 1951. In his article he sets out merely to indicate some of the innovations and achievements of Asturias' style in El Señor Presidente. It is depressing to record that almost twenty years later Loveluck's random comments are still the most suggestive and illuminating things that have been said about the style of that novel. He concluded, as has been said, that El Señor Presidente points a new direction for the Latin American novel. But if there was hope for the novel the same could not be said for the critics, as has been noted:

Los comentarios han sido superficiales, comentarios galantes...

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cana desde las novelas anti-rosistas de la primera mitad del siglo XIX, y que en la misma Guatemala representa el antecedente de El Autócrata (1929) de Carlos Wyld Ospina."

The situation has changed a little as far as El Señor Presidente is concerned, for writers like Carlos Navarro, Guillermo Yepes-Boscán and Juan Carlos Rodríguez Gómez have recently begun to provide at least some excellent studies, but none of Asturias' other books have received any serious attention at all. Fifteen years passed after Loveluck's article, years in which Asturias wrote the Banana Trilogy, Weekend en Guatemala, El Alhajadito, Mulata de tal, and Clarivigilia primaveral. El Señor Presidente was finally translated into English in 1964, but made little impact upon the English-speaking world. Meanwhile, unbeknown to either the English or Spanish-speaking worlds, his novels were selling well in Sweden. He was also, for various reasons, becoming something of a minor celebrity in another strategic country, France. He had spent the 1920s in Paris, had strong Surrealist connections, and classed himself an anti-American écrivain engagé. Strangely enough, however, French critics continued to regard Latin American writers mainly for their curiosity value, and the articles that appeared in Paris were the kind of breathless eulogies that they tend to reserve for the more exotic varieties of literature. With very few exceptions they contributed little that was new to the study of Asturias.<sup>8</sup>

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8. The same may be said of Asturias as Julián Marías says of Camilo José Cela in his Prologue to Paul Ilie's La novelística de Camilo José Cela (Gredos, Madrid 1963), p.10: "Sobre Cela se han escrito más adjetivos que sustantivos y verbos, y los adjetivos son poco esclarecedores." Even so, it is worth remembering that it was none other than Paul Valéry who initiated the French "approach" to Asturias with his 1930 Carta-Prólogo to the Leyendas de Guatemala: "En cuanto a las leyendas, me han dejado traspuesto. Nada me ha parecido más extraño--quiero decir más extraño a mi espíritu, a mi facultad de alcanzar lo inesperado--que estas historias-sueños-poemas donde se confunden tan graciosamente las creencias, los cuentos y todas las edades de un pueblo ... Mi lectura fue como un filtro, porque este libro, aunque pequeño, se bebe más que se lee. Fue para mí el agente de un sueño tropical, vivido no sin singular delicia. He creído absorber el jugo de plantas increíbles..."

El Señor Presidente and Hombres de maíz were each the product of years of experience in life and in poetry. Every word had been shaped and weighted over a long period of time, and then forged into two outstanding novels. Writers do not often create two such parallel achievements, complementary to one another, yet with entirely different subject matter and of similar stature. In two successive novels Asturias managed to capture a personal image of ciudad and campo in Guatemala. He now, not surprisingly, took a new direction, and his next four works in a row were of political inspiration. El Señor Presidente and Hombres de maíz were novels he had inside himself; the next four novels came from outside, imposed upon him, to some extent, by circumstance. It was a time when Asturias was in fact a diplomat, and it coincided with the post-war fashion for political commitment in literature. He now looked not at the inner reality of Guatemala, but at the menace from without in the shape of the United States. The ultimate justification for the writing of the Banana Trilogy came in 1954, with the American-backed invasion of Guatemala by Castillo Armas; and the invasion itself brought a fourth work, Weekend en Guatemala, in 1956. It has frequently been suggested, particularly by Americans and by Latin Americans drawing salaries from the U.S.A., that Asturias' point of view is grossly biased against the United States; but an impartial reading of the history of American commercial interests in Guatemala, combined with a study of plot and characterisation in the Trilogy and in Weekend en Guatemala, would seem to lead to quite the opposite conclusion, as Luis Leal has recognised:

Asturias shows some originality by not following the archetype of the anti-imperialistic novel, in which the characters are drawn in black and white. (9)

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9. "Myth and Social Realism in Miguel Angel Asturias", Comparative Literature Studies, V, 3 (Sept 1968), p.245.

Asturias' political novels are indeed in this sense surprisingly restrained. Their defects lie elsewhere. As such novels go they are acceptable, but the mixture of styles employed is a serious obstacle to success in a writer for whom style is at once so dominant and so instinctive a concern. As Leal says, the reader is "unable to react with heart and mind at the same time."<sup>10</sup> The unity that is the great triumph in El Señor Presidente and Hombres de maíz is quite lacking in the Banana Trilogy, whether seen as individual novels or as a whole. It is arguable that a writer from a small country like Guatemala has different obligations from those born in more fortunate backgrounds. In Latin America writers from more advanced countries, such as Fuentes (Mexico) or Cortázar (Argentina), cannot be compared with those of, for example, Guatemala or Bolivia.

Be that as it may, and it is a question that merits further discussion (in Latin America it is being argued out bitterly in Asturias' case, mainly behind the scenes), Asturias is forced to establish a distinction between language as suggestion and language as pure information, and he fails.<sup>11</sup> The political novel requires convincing characterisation, cohesive plot, and cogent reasoning, and Asturias can provide none of these. His inability to do so forces him to make virtues of his vices, and to create a new kind of novel in El Señor Presidente and Hombres de maíz (and later in Mulata de tal and Maladrón) through an all-purpose, total language. But in the Trilogy he cannot merely create and suggest; he has to demonstrate and explain. The Trilogy breathes the spirit of the age. It contains much good writing, and many home truths, both for Americans and Guatemalans, but the end-result is something less than art.

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10. Leal, op.cit., p.245.

11. See G.Yepes-Boscán, "Asturias, un pretexto del mito", Aportes, no.8 (Paris, April 1968), p.111, n.9: "El testimonio es la prohibición radical a agredir la verdad con la invención."

In 1963 Asturias returned to literature, and to his old concerns, with the publication of Mulata de tal. And 1969 saw the appearance of Maladrón. Neither novel is as obviously outstanding as El Señor Presidente or Hombres de maíz, but each is in its own way a fascinating book, and criticism will one day have a good deal to say about them. Mulata de tal develops the caricaturesque line initiated in El Señor Presidente, and Maladrón returns us to the epic note of much of Hombres de maíz. How many writers of today have the authority to write in this mode: "La cordillera de los Andes verdes, hay para envejecer sin recorrerla toda..."? Leyendas de Guatemala was Asturias' literary genesis; Hombres de maíz and El Señor Presidente examined the two great Guatemalan themes; and Mulata de tal and Maladrón are essays in style and genre. Mulata de tal is a modern picaresque novel of a special kind (the travellers are not people), and Maladrón is a minor epic narrative. They will probably be regarded as minor novels of superlative quality, for they owe nothing to anyone in style or conception. Each forges a language, a new instrument, but both look back to Asturias' first work, Leyendas de Guatemala. They seem to take their author most of the way towards closing his literary cycle.

The cycle, indeed, is a concept invoked by Guillermo Yepes-Boscán, in his brilliant article preceding the crucial Rodríguez Monegal study. Rodríguez Monegal could not have read it, for it forestalls him in every respect. Indeed, it is already clear that the Yepes-Boscán article will be seen to have been the first great step towards a definitive view of Asturias and his place in Latin American literature. It is a view shared by the present writer in every significant respect. Yepes-Boscán's originality is to have reversed the traditional approach to Asturias, which sees him as a writer through whose works there run two separate currents, the fantastic and the realistic, the mythological and the political, that is, the division which seemingly brings Asturias on the one hand the Lenin Peace Prize, and on the other the

Nobel Prize, and which eventually produces the concept of "Los dos Asturias". Instead of subscribing to this view (which seems to have largely been fostered by the Losada blurb writers, and accepted by everyone else), Yepes-Boscán searches for a new approach which will allow him to assess all Asturias' work by means of a single unifying concept, that of the relation between language and myth.

He suggests, firstly, that Asturias is the most representative writer from Latin America in this century precisely because his work incorporates the two fundamental aspects of the continent's literature, the estético-individual and the ético-colectivo;<sup>12</sup> and secondly, that in a continent lacking the individuality of a rich cultural sub-soil, Asturias creates and defines a world of his own. In making these suggestions Yepes-Boscán appears to be looking back to a remark of Fernando Alegría:

Su arte es desorbitado a causa de su carácter experimental, pero esta misma condición lo hace aparecer ante las nuevas generaciones como una síntesis de las enseñanzas que habrán de asimilar para conseguir una renovación básica del género de la novela. (13)

This same idea has also been advanced by Juan Carlos Rodríguez Gómez, with reference to El Señor Presidente:

El Señor Presidente parece anunciar, por su peculiaridad, toda la extraordinaria literatura que--aun contando con el boom periodístico--es hoy, sin duda, la mejor del mundo, y representa la verdadera voz de los pueblos del subdesarrollo.<sup>14</sup>

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12. Yepes-Boscán, pp.104-105: "Asturias se presenta como el paradigma de esa doble exigencia social y estética, colectiva e individual."
  13. Fernando Alegría, Historia de la novela hispanoamericana, 3rd ed. (Ediciones de Andrea, Mexico City, 1966), p.224.
  14. Juan Carlos Rodríguez Gómez, "Miguel Angel Asturias: una estructura del subdesarrollo", La Estafeta Literaria, no.396 (Madrid, 18 May 1968), p.5.

More specifically, Fernando Alegría points to Asturias' use of myth as his most original innovation, one he shares with Alejo Carpentier:

Miguel Angel Asturias en Hombres de maíz (1949) y Alejo Carpentier en El reino de este mundo (1949) y Los pasos perdidos (1953)... dieron categoría estética y significación social a la mitología del Caribe y de Centro América, adelantándose así y asumiendo un papel precursor que los escritores de las nuevas generaciones les reconocen sin discusión. (15)

On the other hand Carlos Fuentes, ironically enough in an interview with Rodríguez Monegal, suggests that Asturias is indeed, with Borges, one of the great innovators, because of his approach to language:

Yo creo que Asturias es uno de los grandes renovadores de la novela latinoamericana... Asturias deja de tratar al indio, a lo que se llamaba el hombre telúrico (horrenda expresión), de una manera documental, para penetrar la raíz mágica, la raíz mítica, a través del lenguaje que hablan estos seres. A través de su lenguaje, Asturias los salva de la anonimidad, esa anonimidad impuesta por la historia. En las novelas de Asturias hay una constante personalización, a través del lenguaje, de pueblos tradicionalmente anónimos. Eso me parece de una importancia extraordinaria. (16)

It is really the same conception, with a shift of emphasis to myth in Alegría's case, and to language in the case of Fuentes. Yepes-Boscán develops both ideas and moulds them into a synthesis:

Si algo es incontestable en la novelística latinoamericana de hoy, es su virtualidad mitificadora y la decidida conciencia del lenguaje como instrumento dilucidador y expansivo de la realidad. Gracias a esas dos cualidades se proyecta y entrega al mundo una imagen más densa de lo que somos. (17)

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15. Fernando Alegría, Novelistas contemporáneos hispanoamericanos (Heath, Boston 1964), p.4.
  16. Carlos Fuentes and Emir Rodríguez Monegal, "Situación del escritor en América Latina", Mundo Nuevo I (Paris, July 1966), pp.19-20.
  17. Yepes-Boscán, p.102.



Latin American literature, he continues, has always been marked by its emphasis on collectivity ("dominio de lo colectivo", p.103), and this remains, but with an enhanced vision and a much more critical approach. Language is seen for what it is--"la realidad primera, el único realismo que el escritor auténtico conoce" (p.101)--and is used to probe the mechanisms and internal structures of "la función fabuladora del espíritu". Then, using the theories of Lévi-Strauss and Eliade to back him up, Yepes-Boscán continues:

Asturias es el creador de la obra más mitológica, en su sentido, casi diríamos riguroso, que ha engendrado América después de la cesación creadora de las llamadas literaturas precolombinas. Restaurada aquella antigua tradición, él ha representado uno de los esfuerzos más serios por encontrar el equivalente imaginario de la síntesis lingüística--en ello está todo lo demás--que constituyen el habla, vivencia mágica del mundo, y ficciones, del hombre centroamericano, tan determinado, étnica y culturalmente (como el mexicano o el de la cultura andina), por lo indígena.<sup>18</sup>

...Asturias ha sabido condensar el otro lenguaje, poniendo su acento sobre lo americano primitivo y lo hispano transformado, hecho cosa nueva, por sistemas lingüísticos y míticos, máquinas salvajes de pensamiento, todavía no desarticuladas y aun funcionales, como diría un lévi-straussiano, a otro nivel estratégico, el de lo sensible. (19)

This is the very essence of Asturias' whole approach to fiction, and the measure of his achievement. A world of apparently undifferentiated and anarchic sensation, of teeming images, conceals a systematic and highly purposeful assault on human reality. It is in this way that Asturias creates his own literary world, and in this idea Yepes-Boscán sees more than just the old critical cliché:

Pero aun más significativa nos parece la reiteración tácita que hay en esta obra de modelo ejemplar de toda especie de creación o de hacer: el mito cosmogónico. En este sentido, nos es

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18. Yepes-Boscán, p.103.

19. Ibid, pp.103-104.

licito conjeturar que el pensamiento mítico afloró en Asturias llevándolo a adoptar un comportamiento literario homologable al comportamiento de cualquiera de sus personajes indígenas. Al escribir sus Leyendas, Asturias inscribía una cosmogonía en su propio Cosmos autónomo, obedeciendo así a la exigencia ancestral de inaugurar toda obra con el bosquejo de los momentos esenciales de la Creación del Mundo, creación que toda obra al ser inaugurada repite por homologación mítica. Digamos, entonces, que el Gran Lengua cumplía, en un gesto de identificación total con el pensamiento de su pueblo, con la recitación correspondiente al mundo indígena y mitológico que él iría a recrear, a fin de que su Obra cobrara significación y existencia de Cosmos, gracias a la repetición por él cumplida del gesto paradigmático.

Su gesto parece no haber sido inútil. Asturias, como su Sacayón, ha fabulado mil Miguelitas de Acatán para que de viejos fragmentos dispersos se engendrara un nuevo universo. Ha sido privilegiado pretexto del mito, rasgo distintivo de su pueblo. (20)

One might add that these remarks may be applied not only to Hombres de maíz, Asturias' most strictly "anthropological" novel, to which Yepes-Boscán is referring here, but to El Señor Presidente as well. For whether he is writing about dictatorship in the city or the clash of cultures in the Guatemalan interior, his method is exactly the same. And these are the two novels which to a large extent prefigure all the varied manifestations of the new novel, examples of which are Asturias' own later works, Mulata de tal and Maladrón.

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20. Yepes-Boscán, p.116.

En la obra a realizar en América, el escritor debe buscar, de preferencia, el tema americano y llevarlo a su literatura con lenguaje americano. Este lenguaje no es el uso del modismo, simplemente. Es la interpretación que la gente de la calle hace de la realidad que vive: desde la tradición hasta sus propias aspiraciones populares. (1)

This declaration was elicited from Asturias in 1949, and is the first important comment on the role of the Latin American writer that he made. In 20 years his published statements have scarcely varied. In the same 1949 article he affirmed that Latin American fiction was, and should be, combative and optimistic: "a través de esas obras valientes se deja entrever la esperanza de una América más americana, y, por lo tanto, mejor."<sup>2</sup>

Now since Asturias spoke these words his work has travelled the long road from El Señor Presidente and Hombres de maíz through the Trilogía bananera to Mulata de tal and Maladrón. Yet in 1967 the present writer heard Asturias outline precisely the thesis quoted above, and conclude his exposition with precisely the same words. Thus while the critical debate has gone on around him, Asturias himself cannot be said to have been much help. His vague, generalised and often contradictory statements, of which the one above is an excellent example, require almost as much critical interpretation as the novels do themselves. He has not set out to write criticism as such--contrast Carpentier, Sábato, Mallea, Onetti, Fuentes--and has only given his opinions when asked to do so, usually in interviews themselves stimulated by the success of his novels. Even then he has spoken with evident

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1. "El escritor americano debe escribir para América", Repertorio Americano, XLVI, 6 (San José de Costa Rica, 1950), p.82.

2. Ibid, p.83.

reluctance. His comments have usually been disappointing and unilluminating, and it is of some interest to question why so original a writer should have so little to say about his own work, or that of other writers.

The simple answer is that Asturias is not at bottom a conscious artist. Indeed, it is a doubtful matter whether any major novelist of modern times has had less to say about his own production, and one wonders how much more successful he might have been had he "explained" them and justified his methods. However, explaining is apparently not to his taste:

Yo creo que es muy difícil para un novelista hacer una explicación académica de su obra, y por eso yo prefiero este tono de charla, de coloquio... (3)

Nevertheless, he also insists--see the quotation which opens this chapter--that his work, like all authentic Latin American literature, is, and always has been, a literature of protest. It might be argued that, of all people, protesters ought to be able to explain their position, but in any case it is hard to reconcile this affirmation with others in which Asturias insists equally vehemently that he never plans his novels in advance:

El Señor Presidente fue escrita sin un plan literario determinado... (4)

Ahora respecto a Mulata de tal, yo debo también confesar que yo nunca planeo una novela completa; me formo una idea más o menos. (5)

Yet on the other hand he dismisses suggestions that his novels are written straight out and despatched at once to the publisher:

Yo creo que mis libros, contra lo que se cree, tienen muchísimo trabajo. El Señor

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3. University of San Carlos, Guatemala, Coloquio con Miguel Angel Asturias (Editorial Universitaria, Guatemala 1968), p.5.
  4. Repertorio Americano, p.83.
  5. Coloquio con Miguel Angel Asturias, p.28

Presidente yo lo copié casi nueve veces enteras. Los primeros capítulos los sabía casi de memoria, hasta hace unos ocho años. Después se me fueron olvidando... (6)

Mis textos son muy trabajados, en cada frase... (7)

To make some sense of all this a distinction must be made between Asturias' explicit views, which would seem to presuppose a consciously critical posture in the socio-political and literary critical fields, and his fictional method, which tends to some extent towards automatism. His approach to the act of writing has been described by Silvia Rudni, after an interview with the author:

Asturias escribe sus novelas por lo menos tres veces. La primera versión es una especie de catarsis: "Me siento y pongo todo lo que me pasa por la cabeza, sin ningún plan fijo." Ese mamotreto, como él lo llama, descansa durante dos meses. "Entonces lo leo con sentido crítico. Es la versión de la tija y la goma; me la paso cortando papeles todo el tiempo." Después de esta operación, otro mes de descanso, y "luego la versión definitiva, cuando agrego o saco párrafos enteros, más bien saco, porque lo que no se dice en una frase no se dice más." El escritor trabaja mucho "con los sonidos; yo leo y escribo en voz alta, y hasta que no suene bien, no sirve. Ahora con ese asunto del grabador, se me simplificó mucho el trabajo.

...La novela--fepite--es como un trabajo corriente. A las seis, yo me siento frente a la maquina, aunque no tenga ganas. A veces pienso que uno se convierte en un burócrata de la novela, pero es así. Durante el día, ni me acuerdo de la literatura, y mis otras tareas no molestan." (8)

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6. Coloquio con Miguel Angel Asturias, p.14.

7. Ibid, p.15.

8. Silvia Rudni, "La tia vieja del dios maya", Primera Plana, no.196 (Buenos Aires, 27 September 1966), p.78.

Asturias has not often been so dispassionate about his writing, which makes this little known interview especially valuable. Here he merely gives us the facts. It is very clear that beyond the various aspects of his writing that bear linguistic witness to the influence of Surrealism, his very method itself is based on Breton's automatism. Breton, as is well known, believed that by sitting himself down at a table to write everything that passed through his head, he would produce something new and wholly "pure", with fresh, unexpected images. Asturias has the same idea:

Lo que obtengo con la escritura automática es el apareamiento o la yuxtaposición de palabras que, como dicen los indios, nunca se han encontrado antes. Porque así es como el indio define la poesía. Dice que la poesía es donde las palabras se encuentran por primera vez. (9)

Clearly he is able, perhaps unconsciously, to take Breton's theory further by linking it to his subject matter, which is so much concerned with myth and magic. It might therefore be said that he writes automatically, but within the context of an undefined artistic intention. The Surrealist movement had its origins in Romanticism, and used Freudian theory to give the Romantic concept of inspiration a more sophisticated foundation. The Surrealists were fascinated by black magic and by the decadentist current in the literature of the late nineteenth century, particularly that of the diabolist Lautréamont. Asturias was himself intrigued by magic

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9. Luis Harss, Los nuestros, 2nd ed. (Sudamericana, Buenos Aires 1968), p.105. This comment is reminiscent of Vicente Huidobro's approach to poetry: "La aristotélica imitación de la Naturaleza es entendida por Huidobro como imitación de sus procedimientos, no de sus productos. Y el poema suyo nace de una célula imaginativa, relación o rappoport de dos palabras, como el árbol frondoso y florido de la simple semilla." The quotation is Gerardo Diego's, reproduced by Antonio de Undurraga in Poesía y prosa de Vicente Huidobro, 2nd ed. (Aguilar, Madrid 1967).

during his student days in Paris, at precisely the period when on the one hand he was meeting with adherents of Surrealism, and on the other beginning his studies of the sacred chronicles of the Maya. A typical product of these divergent influences is Asturias' conception of the nature of words:

Para Asturias, el lenguaje vive una vida prestada. Las palabras son ecos o sombras de seres vivientes. La fe en el poder de las palabras, como ha señalado Octavio Paz en uno de sus ensayos, es una reminiscencia de una antigua creencia en que las palabras son dobles del mundo exterior, y por lo tanto una parte animada de él. Los ritmos del lenguaje--"En el verso", escribe Paz, "ya late la frase y su posible significación"--son instintivos y subconscientes. Y lo subconsciente está cerca de lo mítico.... Y el mito y el ritual son formas arquetípicas de la cosmovisión de un pueblo, indicios de su imagen del mundo. (10)

This attitude to words mirrors exactly Asturias' approach to fiction in general, and this close relation will later be seen to have crucial importance. The concept of words as magic helps to explain Asturias' ambivalent approach to his novels. He has no plan, and yet he has a plan. He seats himself in front of his typewriter each morning, whether he feels like it or not, and begins to write, thereby turning the creative act not into a bureaucratic affair, as he suggests (and as indeed it is for some writers, notably Grahame Greene), but into a ritual, in which he communes with a higher force. It is almost as though he were a medium, a simple intermediary between the higher and the lower world:

Yo hago mi texto de dos o tres horas diarias y no paro a leerlo; sigue, sigue, sigue mi relato hasta que, para mí, una de las cosas más misteriosas es por qué un relato se corta en un momento dado, por qué ya no hay otra mañana en que terminar, por qué llegó a un final.

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10. Harss, pp.103-104.

Este es uno de los misterios de la creación:  
Por qué termina un relato, por qué no se puede  
de terminar, por qué no continuar. (11)

In many such remarks made by Asturias there is a strong sense of passivity, almost of helplessness, and he has made his attitude perfectly clear in another recorded statement:

No creador yo solo, sino vehículo por medio del cual se han dicho estas cosas. Pero no soy dueño de eso, puedo en algún momento dado enmudecer. (12)

Thus it is that when Asturias has completed a novel it becomes something quite separate, almost alien, a true child of his imagination:

A mí me habla El Señor Presidente, y hasta lo he pensado, como un mito que ha sido creado a través de la novela. (13)

His characters, he says, are independent of him. He "listens" to them, he does not invent them:

En la novela, en el diálogo, yo jamás intervengo. ¿Por qué? porque hay un personaje que se expresa. (14)

Returning to Asturias' description of the complete process of writing his novels, we recall that he mentioned three phases in their construction. Firstly, the version which simply flows out of him, albeit only between 6.00 and 9.00 in the morning, with Asturias merely writing down what it dictates to him. This is "the" novel in its pristine form, and up to this point Asturias is apparently following the purest Surrealist doctrine. However, both before and after this cathartic act, he does in fact depart from Bre-

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11. Coloquio con Miguel Angel Asturias, pp.28-9.

12. Yepes-Boscán, p.100.

13. Coloquio con Miguel Angel Asturias, p.9.

14. Ibid, pp.22-3.



ton's recommended procedure. It has already been seen that before beginning to write he has made no set plan; but equally, he conceded that there is something there: "me formo una idea más o menos." What this "idea" is will be discussed below.

Not only does he work something out before writing, however: later he also reworks the first version--the mamotreto--twice, altering both sound and sense. Now as soon as he admits this, he is also admitting that, whether consciously written or not, the novel has to be "right", and he thereby confirms what we have suggested: that there is some kind of guiding intention behind it. Thus spontaneity is not all: the novel has a gestation period before its violent birth, and undergoes severe corrective treatment afterwards. Even so, what is delivered onto the page is largely "the" novel. As this study seeks to reveal a remarkable unity in Asturias' works, which is the direct result of his narrative method, it is essential that it should clarify exactly what it is that Asturias writes about and how he manages to present it in such an artistically unified manner.

After the 1949 interview in Repertorio Americano, Asturias' next important discussion came in an interview with Ricardo Trigueros de León in 1955. In a rare hint at the bases of his fictional methodology, Asturias said that his novels depend not on characters, nor even ideas, but on a central situation, the hecho central:

Toda novela es por excelencia acción, movimiento, vida y, al mismo tiempo, es como la lente que recoge alrededor del hecho central todos aquellos elementos que se entrecruzan siempre que influyan en el lector para crearle la sugerencia de la verdadera vida. (15)

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15. Ricardo Trigueros de León, "Miguel Angel Asturias", Cultura, I (San Salvador, January-February 1955), pp.107-108.

This is arguably the most important recorded comment to have fallen from Asturias' lips. As usual, in discussing "novels in general" he is really only discussing his own. Certainly the orthodox novel is largely dependent upon movement and action, both physical and psychological, but as soon as we begin to consider lenses and closely interweaving elements in the mind of the reader we have moved into a very restricted field which would include Asturias, especially in El Señor Presidente and Hombres de maíz, and Virginia Woolf (especially in The Waves), but few others in quite this sense. His novels are not suggestive as such: Asturias himself exhausts the suggestiveness of his hecho central, not by leaving it as a series of evocative vibrations in the air, but by putting it into his novel. In this sense, one might say that his chains of imagery are ultimately closed, not open-ended. There is, in short, a completed pattern, not a system of evocative references to anything outside the novel itself.

Thus the relation of subject matter to form in Asturias' works is determined by the prior organisation and structuring of the hecho central, which must be understood not as a theme to be "developed" within a conventional plot composed of characters and incidents, but as a corpus or texture of inter-related themes, which are to be organically re-structured through the linear development of language. This conception is reinforced by Asturias' own description of the way in which El Señor Presidente was written:

La novela fue escrita sin un plan literario determinado. Los capítulos se fueron sucediendo uno a otro, como si obedecieran al engranaje de un mundo interno del cual era yo simple expositor. Cuando la terminé me di cuenta que había llevado al libro--no por medios literarios conocidos, de esos que se pueden expresar didácticamente, sino por esa obediencia a las imposiciones de un mundo interno, como dije antes--la realidad de un país americano, en este caso el mío, tal como es cuando se somete a la voluntad de un hombre. (16)

The sentence underlined (the italics are mine) is an almost exact description of the way Asturias writes a novel, as we shall attempt to show in succeeding chapters. The concept of the engranaje is particularly apposite, suggesting not the kind of relatively loose development which is usual in the novel, but a continuous and controlled evolution of interlocking parts, of major and minor motifs, which at plot level is determined by the possible thematic relations between incidents, and between facets of character, and at sentence level by the possible relationships between words, effected through imagery. This organisation of the hecho central into an organic structure of major and minor themes takes place before Asturias begins to write the novel, which is why he feels himself to be merely the medium through which his novels are expressed.

It has been seen already that the beliefs that Asturias shares with the Surrealist movement, and which he first fashioned through contact with that movement, were in fact largely a product of the theories of Freud, whose revelations of the nature of dream processes seemingly released the artist from any necessary obligation to remain loyal to a rationalistic view of reality (on which, it may be noted, the causal relations of the traditional novel are based). As it turned out, the Surrealist influence united with the influence--direct or indirect, as that may be--of Freud's one-time disciple, Jung, to give Asturias' own emotional and artistic inclinations a conscious vision of reality to which they could adhere. It is remarkable that the fundamental concept from which almost everything in Asturias' novels derives has not been isolated:

Entre la realidad y el sueño la diferencia  
es puramente mecánica. (17)

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17. El Señor Presidente, in Obras escogidas, I (Aguilar, Madrid 1955), p.397.

Such a concept is in a sense fundamental to all literature, but Asturias, as he shows here, makes both a programme and a method of it. By sueño he means every kind of "unreality", including dreams themselves, and other temporary afflictions such as hallucinations and intoxication, or even extremes of passion, which verge eventually on madness. The use of the word mecánica would seem to suggest some knowledge of psychoanalytical theories, whilst the internal structure of his novels, and the kinds of statements that have been examined in this chapter, suggest that it is above all Jung's principle of psychic totality which is central here.<sup>18</sup> The basis of Asturias' fictional method coincides with that of Jung's psychology, namely the idea that to begin to understand the human creature we must accept the full reality of all psychic phenomena. Furthermore, just as Jung views the psychic whole in terms of a creative synthesis uniting the processes of thinking, intuition, feeling and sensation, so Asturias, in making his literary examination of reality, arrives in practice at a literary synthesis in his two masterpieces.<sup>19</sup>

Jung sees the psyche as composed of consciousness and the unconscious. The latter further subdivides into the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious. This collective unconscious provides "the primal datum out of which consciousness ever arises afresh" in the individual, giving a balance of typical and individual reactions. The relevance of this to Asturias' fictional method will later become clear. The language of the unconscious is the language of images. Libido, or psychic energy is the total force (creative urge) which pulses

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18. A useful discussion of Jung's theories and their artistic implications is provided by Jolande Jacobi, The Psychology of C.G.Jung, 6th ed. (Yale, New Haven 1962)

19. The need for a more systematic approach to the whole question of form and content in Latin American fiction is only too evident at this time. The use of

through all the forms and activities of the psychic system and establishes communication with them and between them. Already, then, it is possible to establish a parallel between Asturias' concept of the engranaje, and Jung's conception of the structure of the psyche. What the present study seeks to provide is a structural picture of El Señor Presidente, Hombres de maíz and, in a different sense, Mulata de tal, which will show a similar internal dynamism, as a literary parallel to the Jungian view of the psyche, but nevertheless a picture wholly self-supporting without reference to Jung's theory or to any other extra-literary resorts. To this end the concept of the creative synthesis is fundamental.

The first chapter noted Yepes-Boscán's comment on Asturias' use of language, which simulates through literature the psychic structure of the people who comprise the group situation about which he is writing.<sup>20</sup> When all is said and done, the first (or perhaps the last) problem in all literature is by definition one of language: what is said depends on how it is said. In Asturias this is even more evident than in most writers. His every sentence has to be read, in a way we do not have to read other writers. No one would pick up Hombres de maíz for five minutes' light reading any more than they would The Ambassadors. The reader has to exert himself considerably, and if he does he releases some of the energies which Asturias himself released in writing the novel, allowing the dynamic creation of patterns of imagery to take place in reverse. Asturias is conscious of the efforts involved, as we have seen:

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vague and imprecise terms to discuss widely varying techniques and subject matter ("Magical Realism" being the most notorious) has led to much confusion and mystification.

20. This is surely one of the greatest debts owed to Asturias by the modern Latin American novel. Unfortunately, it is another debt as yet unrecognised. Luis Leal, for instance, in "El realismo mágico en

Mis textos son muy trabajados, en cada frase...

Yo leo y escribo en voz alta, y hasta que no suene bien, no sirve.

He has recalled that in the 1920s he and a group of other young Latin American writers used to follow Breton's dogma to the letter: \*

Nos entusias mó a nosotros esa idea de poder-nos sentar a la máquina de escribir o frente a una cuartilla y empezar a escribir mecánicamente procurando la no intervención de la inteligencia.... Estos textos, que al parecer eran disparatados, ya juzgados en cierta forma tenían una cierta unidad, caótica si se quiere, pero eran reveladores, eran textos reveladores de un gran acervo del subconsciente nuestro, de nuestra forma de ser y de pensar tal vez latinoamericana.

Y en esa época empezamos también a estudiar, a formar, a escribir poemas en los cuales leyendo las palabras en un sentido significaban una cosa y juntando las palabras en donde terminaban con el principio de la siguiente palabra significaban otra cosa. Todo esto fue un gran trabajo de laboratorio. (21)

Since those days Asturias has retreated into the use of more emotive expressions to describe his work, but there can be no doubt that these early and informal experiments into language and the functioning of the psyche helped to train him for the peculiar literary method he was soon to develop. It was in the 1920s that Joyce's influence exploded on the literary scene, particularly in Paris, and Asturias, who met Joyce once or twice, fell under that influence:

Con su varita mágica nos enseñó, de golpe, lo que era el poder de la palabra. (22)

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la literatura hispanoamericana", Cuadernos Americanos, CLIII, 4 (Mexico, 1967), p.234, credits it to Juan Rulfo in Pedro Páramo: "Su visión poética de la realidad, expresada en formas lingüísticas extraídas del lenguaje popular, dan a la obra un aire mágico."

21. Coloquio con Miguel Angel Asturias, p.7.

22. Recorded from a personal interview with the writer in September 1967.

Again the image is well chosen, for Asturias does indeed regard language as a magic tool. Joyce he considers not so much a direct personal influence as the writer who created the literary climate in which the full power of language could at last be realised and exploited. Luis Harss is one of the few critics who have realised just how significant Asturias is in this respect:

Nuestros escritores, con su nostalgia por el purismo castellano, fueron siempre demasiado civilizados. Las imitaciones de la "carpintería" española, como la llamaba Unamuno, les habían enajenado el lenguaje, cuyos recursos apenas habían sido tocados. Había llegado el momento de hacer una limpieza general, y Asturias se encarga de manejar la escoba. Rompe deliberadamente con las estructuras mentales de la tradición española. Quiere resucitar y robustecer el lenguaje, no simplemente--y éste podría ser el peligro--haciendo que absorba términos regionales, sino reestructurándolo desde adentro. Es uno de nuestros primeros novelistas--son solo un puñado, aun en la actualidad--en darse cuenta clara del enorme potencial psíquico del idioma hablado. Se declara desde temprano contra la verborrea y el preciosismo. En su obra el lenguaje es temático; es una forma de indagación, de sondeo interior, que desbarrata las normas establecidas de la sintaxis para extraer sus ritmos de las pulsaciones vitales. (23)

We are arriving at an approach in which, language, technique

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23. Harss, Los nuestros, pp.102-103. This interpretation of Asturias' use of language as a means to rebuilding the human mind is again reminiscent of something said by Huidobro many years before: "Nunca el hombre ha estado más cerca de la Naturaleza que ahora, en que no trata ya de imitarla en sus apariencias, sino de proceder como ella, imitándola en el fondo de sus leyes constructivas, en la realización de un todo, en su mecanismo de producción de formas nuevas." (Poesía y prosa de Vicente Huidobro, p.38). It must again be stressed that Asturias' lasting originality lies not in his experimentation, but in the unique achievement of successfully harnessing vanguardista techniques to a treatment of "real" elements within the much less free form of the novel.

and subject matter are indivisible.<sup>24</sup> Harss's view in fact antedates Yepes-Boscán's similar affirmation by two years. Harss' error, a common one, is to assume that this method of Asturias' is relevant only to Hombres de maíz, the anthropological novel par excellence, when in fact precisely the same method is to be found in El Señor Presidente, which as we know was completed by 1933. Furthermore, he fails to go on and relate Asturias' revolutionary use of language to the overall structure of each novel (or, given the brevity and inherent limitations of his work, to suggest the possibility), and later negates his earlier analyses by arguing that it is his "reliance on instinct" which eventually defeats Asturias. This is a pity, particularly when another of Harss' sensitive statements in fact points the way to this overall view, as he discusses in other terms what we have referred to as the prior organisation in the writer's mind of the hecho central:

Las asociaciones prelógicas forman una especie de trama subterránea en la que un autor como Asturias, atento a sus sortilegios, descifra mensajes, secretos, realidades ocultas u olvidadas. En Asturias la metáfora tiene una función orgánica. (25)

Harss' essential limitation, like that of all approaches relying mainly on alien disciplines, is that he tends to forget that Asturias' work is one of literature. Anthro-

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24. See Mark Schorer, "Technique as Discovery", in (Ed.) William Van O'Connor, Forms of Modern Fiction, 5th ed. (University of Minnesota Press, 1964), pp.9-29, for a brilliant examination of the problem of technique: "The difference between content, or experience, and achieved content, or art, is technique. When we speak of technique, then, we speak of nearly everything. For technique is the means by which the writer's experience, which is his subject matter, compels him to attend to it; technique is the only means he has of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, of conveying its meaning, and, finally, of evaluating it." (p.9)

25. Harss, p.104.



pology, sociology, psychology, history, linguistics, etc., all help us to understand a writer. But a novel is not sociology, nor anthropology, nor any other of the sciences of man: it is an exercise in literary creation, and in the specific case of Asturias we are concerned to discover precisely what is the relation between language and subject matter in his novels, that is, to define his fictional method, and this is the task of the chapters to come. Harss has recorded another of Asturias' rare and valuable statements of his view of literature, which returns us at the same time to his work in the literary laboratories:

La poesía ha sido mi laboratorio. Y hay algo más. Creo que los poetas americanos tienen un gran papel que hacer en nuestra novela, cuando son capaces de manejarla. Porque nuestras novelas respiran poesía. Tienen un lirismo que las transfigura. (26)

Again the question of how true this generalisation may be of the Latin American novel as a whole can be ignored: it is certainly true of the best novels of Asturias, which fall within the scope of the lyrical novel as it has been defined by Ralph Freedman.<sup>27</sup> But this "poesía", this "lirismo" is not the kind of merely effusive and consciously "inspirational" prose that has marked the Latin American novel as "romantic" in the pejorative sense, but rather a methodical and functional use of language, particularly metaphor, in the creation of an organic and all-embracing corpus of experience in each novel.

Within this conception it will be possible clearly to see that all the materials of fiction--characters, plot, setting--are transformed into something different, into meta-

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26. Harss, p.122.

27. Ralph Freedman, The Lyrical Novel (Oxford University Press, London 1963).

phor.<sup>28</sup> This is the whole art of Asturias' fiction. It means that character as such is of minor importance, at least in the significance usually attributed to the word. What Asturias is concerned to do is to generalise and actualise at one and the same time. Neither the characters nor the action are "deep" in the sense that their depiction is complex or profound, but they are given extra dimensions by their intimate and organic relationship to the metaphorical substratum, which is, indeed, everything else that is "in" the novel. As Luis Harss expresses it:

Dar voz a una visión ha sido todo el sentido de la obra de Asturias. (29)

The succeeding chapters will attempt to show just how Asturias sets about giving voice to each of his visions.

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28. See Francisco Méndez, "Fama, palabra y magia de Miguel Angel Asturias", Salón 13, I, 1 (Guatemala, November 1960), pp.114-115: "En los personajes de sus obras de ficción, la vaguada la constituye la poesía, la magia, --por encima de su follaje humano, o más bien por debajo, en los cimientos; más que de personajes y hombres suplantados o pasados a diágrafa, o metonímicos, alientan vida de metáfora y por una suerte de sinécdoque la magia los hace hombres reales, sin dejar de ser meras figuras de dicción. Caminan a guisa de tropos, y de fuera adentro, en cuerpo y en alma, sufren efectos parecidos a los que en retórica denominan licencias poéticas. Se vive con ellos en plena metátesis, se respira la metagoge, la paragoge, pero no con trucos verbales sino como metaplasmos de carne y hueso, sino en la psiquis y aun en el soma de los personajes."

29. Los nuestros, p.103.

### CHAPTER III      "EL SEÑOR PRESIDENTE"

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In 1898, a year before Miguel Angel Asturias was born, Manuel Estrada Cabrera seized the presidency of Guatemala, and so began a reign of terror which lasted until 1920, by which time Asturias was a student of Law in the University of San Carlos. El Señor Presidente, his most famous novel, is a fictional representation of this dark period in Guatemalan history. It was begun (originally as a short story) in 1922, only two years after Estrada Cabrera's fall from power, and was completed in 1932 after Asturias had spent ten years in Paris. By this time a new dictator, Jorge Ubico, was governing the country, and the publication of such a book was impossible, with the result that El Señor Presidente did not finally appear until 1946.

Such details are, however, largely irrelevant to the purpose of this study, since it is concerned to examine not the relation of the novel to the historical situation from which it derived, but its own internal structure as an independent and coherent work of art. This is not to discount the usefulness of historical or sociological data, but to treat Asturias' novel on its own terms. El Señor Presidente is not "about" Estrada Cabrera:<sup>1</sup> indeed, it leaves all individualising detail far behind. It is not, therefore, a "political" novel according to the meaning usually given to that term. Its real theme is not dictatorship at all, nor even fear, its inevitable result, but something anterior to either: evil. This, by definition, is hardly a suitable theme for a political novel.

The hecho central that Asturias is to examine and

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1. Nevertheless, the dating is unmistakable. The narrative clearly begins in 1916, as a reference to the Battle of Verdun on p.455 of Obras escogidas, I, clearly shows.

bring to synthesis in El Señor Presidente is that of a city held in the grip of a tyrannical political regime. However, it must be emphasised from the outset that the writer seeks to render the wholeness of this central situation, and the novel is as much an examination of human reality itself as of the form it takes in the minuscule world of an obscure Guatemalan dictatorship. The constant effort to achieve fusions of form and subject matter which is so characteristic of Asturias' fiction is an attempt at reproducing the wholeness of relations in life itself. Despite its final complexity the novel responds to a highly unified and essentially simple plan: only the execution is complex. There is really only one setting, the city, which is seen fragmentarily, always different in form but never really so in essence, throughout the novel. Furthermore, there is really only one character (or consciousness), shown also in fragmentary form as it is materialised into the range of individuals who make up the action: and these, too, divide quite simply into victims and oppressors.

El Señor Presidente is an unusual enough novel in any context, let alone in the context of Latin American literature at the time it was published, but it is still the most orthodox of the novels considered in this study. It is probably the only one in which Asturias manages to marshal the multiple strands of a conventional plot in any convincing fashion. (Of course in some novels, notably Hombres de maíz and Mulata de tal, he does not even try.) Further, it is the only one which makes a serious attempt to relate specific thoughts and feelings to individualised personalities within a causally motivated narrative. However, to the most basic aspects of plot construction Asturias adds a range of internal themes and a complex of unspoken episodic parallelisms and contrasts. As one reads the novel one realises that it is to an unusual extent the fusion of a series of diverse and sharply contrasting ele-

ments which are to be found in each of its functional parts. That is to say, there are no easy divisions to be imposed upon it, which is why so little comprehensive analysis has so far been made. Each of the elements of which one normally speaks when discussing the novel--plot, characters, setting, theme--consists of parallel internal conceptions, and the "ideas" of the novel are to be found within these parallels and contrasts.

Faced with such a novel the traditional approach to narrative is inadequate. El Señor Presidente must be looked at whole, and an argument based solely or largely on a consideration of plot and character as determined by the central theme is unsatisfactory. The plot here would be of scarce interest were it not for the carefully worked organic relation to the wider thematic network. Thus contrary to normal practice the events of the novel as such will be left until the end, and the reason for this should become clear as the argument develops. Instead, a series of cross-analyses will first be made to examine the way in which all the fragmentary supporting elements combine to produce the unified overall pattern of the novel, which logically responds to the author's own pattern of beliefs and vision of reality. As it crystallises within this framework the central theme will be isolated. Then, finally, the events of the narrative can be followed in sequential fashion to see how the theme determines the direction of the plot according to Asturias' attitude to reality and to the apprehension of knowledge. This is the creative synthesis: the re-enactment of the eternal human movement from a world of images and sensations to a world of meanings and ideas.

To sum up, there are two broad concepts through which the dimensions of this work can be established. The first corresponds to the internal or horizontal structure as a kind of radiograph, that is, a conception in which the active forces of the novel are not the traditional elements referred to above, but the dynamic texture of accompanying

themes which give the plot its real meaning. This is a synchronic view. The second concept entails tracing the vertical or diachronic development of the narrative, as it gradually imprints a final outline meaning on all the complex inter-related meanings of the inward framework. Such an approach is possible, indeed essential, because Asturias' technique, contrary to what has generally been affirmed, is based on a systematic narrative method in which everything relates to something else within the work as a whole. Thus orthodox procedures are here reversed: we shall argue from the outside inwards, constantly narrowing Asturias' circle of suggestiveness, from the setting (in the very broadest sense of the term) to the characters, and finally to the actions they perform and the meanings that may ultimately be attributed to them. This is not a case of the theme giving direction to the events that go to make up the plot, but rather of the apparently undifferentiated background slowly evolving (i.e., being dissected and reconstituted through Asturias' approach to description) into an ultimate shape. In the process it should become clear that if El Señor Presidente is not treated both as novel and poem--for this is really the point--its very essence is irremediably lost. It is not, even were such a thing possible, an "ordinary" novel written in a poetic manner, but rather one conceived and executed in a wholly original fashion. Because Asturias "says" nothing in his novels is no reason to suppose that they have no meaning.

## 1. THE STRUCTURE OF EXISTENCE

### A Collective Consciousness

The human psyche is born into a world it perceives as an unbroken stream of sense impressions. Slowly it becomes patterned by the diverse elements of reality--they programme it like a computer--until eventually the mind comes increasingly to cease to be patterned and to begin itself to impose patterns upon these elements by classifying them in the ways they suggest to its peculiar given structure. Asturias simulates both the undifferentiated sense field and the psychic processes through which we perceive it. In evoking the apparently overwhelming diversity of life, he surreptitiously finds his own way through the incoherent mass of impressions in various ways, and whilst attending to the demands of his plot he weaves into the very texture of the narrative elements which return it time and again to the same series of underlying themes. Not merely concerning himself with the causal or psychological logic of his narrative development, he forces the reader constantly to register occult recognitions of relationships whose connections and provenances he cannot easily trace. The point of view is ceaselessly changing as a narrative of ever alternating intensity moves rapidly from one sensation to another:

Todo en movimiento. Nada estable. Retratos y retratos confundiéndose, revolviéndose, saltando en pedazos para formar una nueva visión fugaz a cada instante, en un estado que no era sólido, ni líquido, ni gaseoso, sino el estado en que la vida está en el mar. (p.276)

Camila's vision of the sea, which fuses with her impressions of the moving pictures (remembering that the novel was written between 1922-32), comes when she visits the

coast for the first time at the onset of adolescence, the age of seemingly infinite possibility, and can be seen as a conscious evocation by Asturias of his own literary method, in which the elements of the novel combine at different levels and in different ways to form ever new combinations until a synthesis of the sea of images is finally achieved.<sup>2</sup> Camila's emergent womanhood is awakening to life, and maturity has not as yet imposed its hardened conception of the world, which she still views as an unceasing temporal progression, not a relatively static structure of more or less definitively conceptualised elements. It should again be emphasised that the elements of reality only appear to be largely undifferentiated and unstratified: a pattern is imposed partly by the plot (to the extent that the novel is "political", it must in some degree depend upon its action), though this is only the ultimate method and the one closest to the surface. The end-result of this approach to the novel is not merely a linear development of the usual kind, but a mosaic-like pattern, with plot and character, themselves composed of patterns of imagery, imprinting a central conceptual design upon a background which is an abstract amalgam of the same kinds of elements. The plot constitutes a particular situation whose elements demonstrably derive from the more generalised essences of the background: as if the background were a kind of store upon which the foreground continuously feeds.

Traditionally conceived novels reproduce the rational post-perceptive world of our mental concepts. In El Señor Presidente the correspondence between the themes of the broad movement of the novel and the links forged by metaphor within each brief description gives an apparently dynamic motion (the creation of the mosaic) which is really

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2. See chapter IV, pp.148-56, on the chuchó episode, for a more detailed account of this technique.



the functioning of the reader's own mental process in response to a system of language, that is, the creation as he reads of the concepts which the traditional novel normally presents as given. Where such a traditional novel rests mainly on assumptions of the reader's deductions from his own experience for their illusion of verosimilitude, Asturias' work relies almost exclusively on the reader's recognition of known elements. The primary features of his work are therefore recognition and its corollary, immediacy, both of which are concentrated by the emphasis on sensation, rather than rational understanding. The novel gives a sense of completeness, of the wholeness of psychic processes, by showing both sense perception and conceptualisation, which are together in effect a kind of theory and practice in reverse: just as, in the extract indicating "el estado en que la vida está en el mar", Asturias provides an implicit literary theory or technical principle which is put into practice throughout the novel.

To achieve the pattern he seeks Asturias uses a surprisingly limited number of basic elements. The complexity of the novel lies in their execution. There is nothing like the infinitely varied wealth of experience to be found in a work like Ulysses, and yet the author of El Señor Presidente manages to give, if anything, an even greater impression of diversity, and herein lies the key to the success of his novel. It is only by using the methods of poetry in fictional guise to give the impression of a vast turmoil of elements that he can eventually produce the result he intends. The seemingly continuous succession of people and things depends largely on his inventiveness with metaphor, and is matched on a magnified scale by the complex interweaving of parallel themes, moods and incidents, with imagery again providing the endlessly resourceful fount of relations between them. The resulting density seems to be that of a far longer novel. All the

elements of reality itself are fragmented and reduced to their constituent parts--a semantic process, in effect--so that they can be reconstituted in the way the author desires.<sup>3</sup>

"Reality itself", of course, is essentially an objective concept, since by definition its perception is effected by all of us through the same psychic processes, even if our attitudes, and hence our inferences, are different.<sup>4</sup> The novel is not concerned with subtleties of characterisation: the aspects of personality which are outlined do not refer primarily to the character in focus at that moment but, in the first place, to thematic currents in the novel, and in the second, to the ghostly construct of an anguished and wholly abstract human psyche which appears as it were behind the scenes in every scene, and which is implicit in every word Asturias writes. The novel quite simply presents a human reaction to a central situation and, in doing so, reduces social and political problems to what they are at bottom: merely human ones.

Before going on to examine these questions in detail, it will perhaps be as well to touch on a couple of general aspects of technique. We shall see how Asturias creates the sense of diversity which is the initial impact made by El Señor Presidente. It should be mentioned that he has

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3. Cf Herbert Read, A Concise History of Modern Painting (Thames and Hudson, London 1959), which characterises one branch of Cubism as "proceeding towards a fragmentation of perception and a reconstruction of form according to laws of the imagination." (p.106) This may be compared with Huidobro's creacionista thesis as already noted on p.36, n.23 above. On p.108 of the same work Read applies more or less the same idea to Futurism, Dadaism and Surrealism, noting that "it has been a characteristic of these movements that poets and literary propagandists have played a large part in their formation."
  4. It is this concept that is at the root of Lévi-Strauss' theory of structural anthropology, as Edmund Leach indicates in Lévi-Strauss (Fontana, London 1970), p.26: "our capacity to apprehend the nature of Nature is sev-

the ability to wring intensity out of any situation in very few words by ignoring circumstance and going directly to the heart of the matter.<sup>5</sup> He manages to devote an unusually short lapse of narrative time to each constituent item, thereby creating the impression of an enormous number of tiny details, each of which is focused in one or two brief strokes before the darting point of view moves on. This could be described as a kind of concentrated impressionism--in the sense that each element refers not only to the moment in question, but also in some way to other moments throughout the novel--and it is reinforced by the allied technique of enumeration, wherein strings of objects are listed in relation to some central idea or situation. This usually occurs at the beginning of a chapter and serves both to add to the apparent confusion and to give Asturias a nucleus of elements with which to play in the narrative to come. By contrast, he will return again and again to indices of time (dawn, nightfall, morning or afternoon) or weather (sun, rain, wind) to fill the background with familiar orienting sensations.

Thus from the first pages a counterbalancing suggestion of unity, or at least a movement towards unity, is set up against the apparently anarchic multiplicity of impressions, and this is merely the surface manifestation of a deeper underlying unity which only gradually

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erely restricted by the nature of the apparatus through which we do the apprehending. Lévi-Strauss' thesis is that by noticing how we apprehend Nature, by observing the qualities of the classifications which we use and the way we manipulate the resulting categories, we shall be able to infer crucial facts about the mechanism of thinking."

5. This ability, which is very difficult to define, will be discussed at greater length below. It seems to coincide with what Iber Verdugo calls Asturias' vitalismo or esencialismo in his El carácter de la literatura hispanoamericana y la novelística de Mi-

becomes clear. The novel becomes condensed, concentrated, compressed. And within this continuum the aim is not, as Carlos Navarro and others have suggested, to maintain the novel at a constant pitch, but rather to maintain the same kinds of variation around the same kinds of recurring theme, and thereby to achieve the impression of billowing possibility which will allow Asturias to follow his chosen path to its required conclusion.

In all this the concept of psychic totality is crucial. All our experience is psychic. Objects which exist in space impose sensations upon us, and these sensations are psychic images, which are our only immediate experience.<sup>6</sup> The emphasis upon sensation, one of the central innovating features of twentieth-century literature, is everywhere apparent in Asturias' novels. None of the characters in El Señor Presidente ever really reflects for the sake of reflection. With the partial exception of Cara de Angel, their thoughts and feelings are always prompted by the situation in which they find themselves, and this is almost always connected directly to the hecho central, the dictatorship. In this sense, there is no time wasted on philosophical meditation. But in the sense that philosophy is regarded as an examination of the nature of reality the novel is highly philosophical, for its whole concern is to examine the nature of being through its style and structure; that is to say, the author makes the examination, not the characters themselves.

Asturias is at pains to simulate the immediacy of sensation in life, which he undertakes in various ways. The

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guel Angel Asturias (Editorial Universitaria, Guatemala City, 1968): "Lo esencial y lo vital de cada caso en todos los detalles plasmados." (p.385)

6. See C.G.Jung, La realidad del alma, trans. Fernando Vela and Felipe Jiménez de Asúa, 4th ed. (Losada, Buenos Aires 1968), p.21: "La psiquis es el ser más real porque es el único ser inmediato."

opening of chapter 28 ("Habla en la sombra") is a piece of pure dramatisation which arrests the reader's attention and secures it for most of the chapter. Again, at the opening of chapter 17 ("Amor urdemales") the author's voice is wholly absent:

-...¡Si vendrá, si no vendrá!  
-¡Como si lo estuviera viendo!  
-Ya tarda; pero con tal que venga, ¿no  
le parece? (p.324)

But as soon as the narrator intervenes again to explain that "La Masacuata seguía desde el rincón... las palpitaciones de la voz de Camila", we return to the world of the novel (reporting instead of dramatising) and the immediacy of impact recedes.

Any device tending to reduce the objectivity of fictional narration may be used by Asturias, and this involves borrowing from the dramatic and poetic genres. Equally, there are numerous techniques discovered by the modern novel itself and by the cinema. There is little or no narrative presence in much of the novel, and no introduction as such. In short, there is a constant effort to impose the primacy of sensorial perception over conceptualisation, which has been so important an aspect of fiction since Henry James insisted that effects should be systematically rendered, not reported, and, more especially, since Joyce began balancing the life view of the novel by emphasising the hitherto neglected aspects of man's being: sensation, on the one hand, and the unconscious mind on the other.

Asturias, who confesses, as we have seen, to having learned much about the potentialities of language from Joyce's work, is highly inventive where the expression of sense perception and mental processes is concerned, and El Señor Presidente in particular constantly reminds us of what life looks, sounds and feels like. The method he uses to fix human movements is almost always to state one action in terms of another, thereby defining the visual appearance exactly:

...ensayando gestos como los que se defienden dormidos... (p.509)

...alzaba el brazo con lento ademán y abría la mano, como si en lugar de hablar fuese a soltar una paloma. (p.478)

In either case the second, compared movement holds some kind of metaphorical relation to the situation of the person involved. In the first example Cara de Angel, unable to accept his situation (he has been treacherously arrested), imagines that he must be undergoing a nightmare, but he nevertheless makes wild gestures which express his bitter realisation that the predicament is only too real. In the second example a poet, hand outstretched, is about to declaim; the symbolic idea of a dove taking off is obviously apposite.

By using the second, parallel action to fix the visual image (before the concept) of the first action, Asturias induces recognition, rather than understanding, in the reader's mind. These mental comparisons of visual elements simulate the perception of a viewer in life, and therefore provoke a very much more immediate reaction than the process of following a slower, logically constructed series of descriptive elements, the culmination of which would be that the reader would "see" (i.e., understand) what the writer was "getting at".

Sounds are expressed in concrete terms, and there are innumerable examples in the novel:

...resuello grueso como cepillo de lavar caballos (p.262)

...una serie de abanicos de vivas... (p.298)

Los vivos de la Lengua de Vaca se perdieron en un incendio de vítores que un mar de aplausos fue apagando. (p.299)

Mental processes are similarly expressed:

Los caballitos de sus lágrimas arrastraban desde lo más remoto de su cerebro la negra idea. (p.334)



...la imagen de Camila se alargó hasta partirse por la mitad, como un ocho por la cintura, con ese movimiento rapidísimo de la pompa de jabón que rompe un dispafo. (p.383)

The emphasis is therefore on how people move and how their thoughts move, since the reader is well enough able to work out for himself what the movements signify in any given context: he does so unceasingly in life. If we go on from how movements look and how noises sound to how things feel, we find that this too is rendered in concrete terms:

Libertó un brazo de la sábana y se lo dobló bajo la cabeza.... Se le acalambro el brazo que tenía bajo la cabeza a guisa de almohada y lo fue desdoblando poco a poco, como se hace con una prenda de vestir en la que anda un alacrán...

Poco a poco...

Hacia el hombro le iba subiendo un ascensor cargado de hormigas... Hacia el codo le iba bajando un ascensor cargado de hormigas de imán... Por el tubo del antebrazo caía el calambre en la penumbra... Era un chorro su mano. Un chorro de dedos dobles... Hasta el piso sentía las diez mil uñas... (pp.355-56)

At first a movement and a sensation are expressed in conceptual terms: folding and cramp. The complementary unfolding movement is subsequently expressed in terms of a similar movement--a shirt being gingerly unfolded--which gives a clearer vision of the external appearance. The real reason for the movement being so cautiously carried through is that Cara de Angel has cramped his arm into pins and needles, but Asturias never says so, conveying it instead in terms of a composite concrete idea, that of the lift, which communicates the sensation of an internal motion upwards and downwards, and of the ants (its passengers), which communicates the tingling feeling itself.<sup>7</sup>

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7. One aspect of the use of synaesthesia and allied techniques has been admirably described by Carlos Navarro in "La hipotiposis del miedo en El Señor Presidente", Revista Iberoamericana, XXXII, no.61 (Jan-June 1966), pp.51-60.

We have now travelled the long road from vision, which involves least contact with the world of things, through auditory sensations, to physical ones. All the examples mentioned thus far are of one or two means of perception in isolation. Other examples will show in embryo the tendency to synthesis which characterises all Asturias' work, and which in this first novel moves towards an integration (and complementary disintegration) of the elements involved in the perception of reality. As the overall structure unfolds, an implicit corresponding psychic structure is simultaneously developed in all its wholeness:

Abatido por la pena sentía que el cuerpo se le enfriaba. Impresión de lluvia y adormecimiento de los miembros, de enredo con fantasmas cercanos e invisibles en un espacio más amplio que la vida, en que el aire está solo, sola la luz, sola la sombra, solas las cosas. (p.438)

No pudo hablar. Dos tenazas de hielo imposibles de romper le apretaban el cuello y el cuerpo se le fue resbalando de los hombros para abajo. Había quedado el vestido vacío, con su cabeza, sus manos y sus pies. (p.443)

In both cases an emotion--grief--has had a physical effect upon the character in question. In the first, the effect is cumulative, producing a drowsy, enervated feeling ("lluvia y adormecimiento") which Cara de Angel's wandering mind associates somehow with invisible presences in a disconnected world. (Asturias' emphasis here on space and the inter-relation of its occupants will be important later.) An emotional state has produced a physical sensation, which in turn suggests a mental concept to its passive percipient.

In the second case, the effect of the grief is not cumulative but instantaneous, and its violence is conveyed in highly concrete terms. The woman ~~is~~ conscious only of her shock and dismay. The passage continues:

En sus oídos iba un carruaje que encontró en la calle. Lo detuvo. (p.443)



Two modes of perception, visual and auditory, are involved here, with a complete absence of conceptualisation on the part of the perceiving character. Stunned by her grief, she is only vaguely aware of the carriage, and this vague awareness is expressed in the use of the imperfect, iba: it is some time before her mind half-consciously realises its presence and her need to stop it. The sudden realisation is expressed in the use of the preterite, encontró. Instead of this compressed sentence, Asturias might have written, "she heard a carriage, looked up, saw it, and made to hail it", or something of the sort; but this would have arranged her actions in the logical order imposed by our ordinary language, and would have robbed us of the more precise relation of thought and feeling to action which was in fact the case. The continuation gives another example of the device of framing one movement within another:

Los caballeros engordaron como lágrimas al enarcar la cabeza y apelonarse para hacer alto. (p.443)

The reader cannot fail to notice that the analogy of the movement of the horses to the formation of tears is perfectly conceived to synthesise two elements: the situation of the shocked and grief-stricken woman (internal emotion) and the horses pulling up sharp (external vision), the self and the outside world. The irresistible impulse to unity, seen here at sentence level, is stronger in this novel than in any other by Asturias precisely because he is dealing with an apparently disintegrating world.

It is clear by now that one of the means by which this novel reproduces the diversity of life is by unannounced oscillations in the text between rational and emotional visions of narrative elements, with the characteristic conflict between sense impressions before and after they register within the patterns of rational understanding. Asturias, in short, is attempting to produce a synthetic vision of his hecho central. It is therefore essential to reproduce as

closely as possible the whole of our psychic totality as a unifying force, and hence to suggest what people actually experience, rather than confine the narrative to what they say or think. Time and again, for example, the sensation of riding in a carriage is recreated (pp.392, 448, 449, 450, 476, 477, 494), as if it were the same carriage again and again at different moments, and the remarkable sequence evoking Cara de Angel's train journey is full of examples of the importance of sensation in creating a total vision:

Al paso del tren los campos cobraban movimiento y echaban a correr como chiquillos uno tras otro, uno tras otro, uno tras otro: árboles, casas, puentes... ...

...Uno tras otro, uno tras otro, uno tras otro...

...La casa perseguía al árbol, el árbol a la cerca, la cerca al puente, el puente al camino, el camino al río, el río a la montaña, la montaña a la nube, la nube a la siembra, la siembra al labriego, el labriego al animal...

(p.504)

Cara de Angel is gazing abstractedly out of the train window, with his mind on other things. The passage is purely visual, with no conceptualisation on the part of the viewer. None of the objects mentioned are alive, except the labriego and animal, nor are they pursuing one another: but to say that the train sped past fields, fences, rivers, etc., would be to ignore the visual sensation and would therefore place the narrative eye at a distance.

The journey wears on and Cara de Angel grows tired:

Cara de Angel abandonó la cabeza en el respaldo del asiento de junco. Seguía la tierra, plana, caliente, inalterable de la costa, con los ojos perdidos de sueño y la sensación confusa de ir en el tren, de no ir en el tren, de irse quedando atrás del tren, cada vez cada vez más atrás del tren, más atrás del tren, más atrás del tren, más atrás del tren, cada vez más atrás, cada vez más atrás, cada vez más atrás, más y más cada vez cada vez, cada vez cada vez, cada vez cada vez, cada vez cada vez cada vez...

(p.505)

It is striking that Asturias has foreshadowed concrete poetry in passages like this, and yet there is no trace of artificiality, since their use is always strictly functional. Once again he has reproduced the totality of the situation by expressing something that is neither the exact noise made by the train nor the thoughts passing through Cara de Angel's head, but an approximation to both and, through the substitution of -ver for vez, a suggestion both in Cara de Angel's subconscious and at the level of the text, that there is mortal danger ahead. It must be repeated that this is not an isolated example, but merely one of the clearest illustrations of a tendency to unity and compression at the heart of the novel.

Many writers have mentioned that although the novel obviously takes place in Guatemala during Estrada Cabrera's dictatorship, neither the country nor the man are ever specifically named.<sup>8</sup> The intention behind this, they correctly deduce, is to give the novel universal significance, though such a deduction in many cases conceals an underlying horror of being confronted only by the text itself, and concern that El Señor Presidente, supposedly a "political" novel, should not be amenable to direct and certain reference to a given time and place. In fact we can go much further than this. A good example of the refusal to give names to places or characters is the treatment of the sacristán, who is always referred to as simply that, except, significantly, in one of the partes to the President, in which he is named as Casimiro Rebeco Luna. A name gives a character a time and a place in history, a certain particularity which Asturias wishes to avoid, just as concepts, in a sense, are specific names for things. The insertion of the partes suggests that all that takes place is to be attributed a historical reality, whilst the presentation of the events themselves contrives to impress their actuality. None of the characters involved are

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8. To those who know Guatemala there is a wealth of detail in the novel which leaves no doubt of the setting.

significant in themselves, which is why so few of them are named, except for nicknames or generic terms and titles such as Presidente, sacristán or estudiante.

Further, none of the people in the novel are profoundly characterised, because problems of personal identity and idiosyncrasy would distract the reader from the essential purpose of the novel, namely that of developing an integrated psychic construct uniting all the characters in one composite being, at once abstract and concrete, which alone faces the existential terrors and social injustices under the dictatorship. This is what is really meant by the hecho central, and this is how the creative synthesis can begin to be achieved.

There is a brief comment by the author himself that shows quite clearly that Asturias is well aware of the importance of rendering the immediacy of psychic processes in this novel. About to part, Cara de Angel and Camila cannot bring themselves to speak:

[Cara de Angel] no se atrevía a apagar la luz,  
ni a cerrar los ojos, ni a decir palabra. Estaban tan cerca en la claridad, cava tal distancia la voz entre los que se hablan... (p.502)

This intuition in his characters defines almost exactly Asturias' attitude to the immediacy of communication, though at one remove. Any human situation involves a physical and a spoken possibility as vehicles of the emotional relationship between those concerned. Physical expression is the more intimate, and therefore to speak would be to remove the emphasis from the more to the less intimate possibility. So it is that at this moment of crisis the couple remain silent: to speak would involve the formulation of their feelings in concepts, which are the very root of language, and which immediately freeze emotion. Equally poetry, and the poetic novel, which have no choice but to use language, have the option of using it to render or report perception, and choose the first of these possibilities. Asturias might almost have written, "cava tal distancia la voz del autor entre el que lee y la

realidad escrita". He has alluded within the novel to one of the fundamental problems of fiction, and by implication to the technique he uses to resolve it, just as the "vida en el mar" extract indicated--and suggested a technical resolution for--the problem of evoking life's diversity.

The tumult of sensorial perceptions and the rapid succession of percipients form between them an endlessly complex flux which can never be frozen into fixed conceptual patterns, and it is part of the purpose of this novel to suggest that complexity; but equally, as a counterbalance, we are subtly but systematically presented with a stylistic procedure which itself represents the psychic process, as life's individual particles are formed into coherent, if transitory groups, by the categorising function of the human mind, just as mankind itself forms into social structures, a perverted example of which is the Guatemalan social situation depicted in this novel. The view of reality that emerges is an individually oriented one, and as such subjective; but in so far as it is, by systematic repetition, shown to be common to all men, despite the social dislocation of this situation, it becomes an impersonal (because inter-personal), almost objective, view of life's structure, both within and without the human mind. Thus no matter which individual psyche acts as vehicle for the narrative at any one moment, the underlying "structure of vision" is identical in each case.

### The Problem of Reality

It is this wholeness of vision, both within the individual psyche, and in the relations between the individual and the group, that gives the novel such a tight internal structure.<sup>9</sup> We have seen that for Asturias, as for modern psy-

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9. Cf Claude Lévi-Strauss, Tristes Tropiques (trans. as World on the Wane, London 1961), p.62: "Anthropology affords me an intellectual satisfaction: it rejoins at one extreme the history of the world and at the other the history of myself, and it unveils the shared motivation of one and the other at the same moment."

chology, there is no objective difference between what we term the real and the unreal, since the only reality is that of the psyche. Equally, according to Levi-Strauss, this is good sociology:

Social facts do not reduce themselves to scattered fragments. They are lived by men, and subjective consciousness is as much a form of their reality as their objective characteristics. (10)

Hitherto we have considered only how the psychic processes adjust to the demands of immediate reality; but the elements of reality need not be organised in temporal progression. They can be rearranged, blurred, or distorted by the human mind, and the movement may be inwards and backwards as well as forwards. This is what happens in dreams, madness, memory, and hallucinations. The character in whom these aspects of reality are most clearly focused is Pelele:

Las uñas aceradas de la fiebre le aserraban la frente. Disociación de ideas. Elasticidad del mundo en los espejos. Desproporción fantástica. Huracán delirante. Fuga vertiginosa, horizontal, vertical, oblicua, recién nacida y muerta en espiral... (p.205)

In this, one of the most significant passages in the novel, Asturias is once again not only presenting a succinct impression of the working of a character's mind, which we are to see developed at length in practice, but is also shedding light on the functionality of his own methods in this novel, which is so much concerned with the distortion imposed by a dictatorship upon the mental life of a city. He has to some extent anticipated Robbe-Grillet's method of merging factual episodes with imagined and remembered ones into an undifferentiated whole.

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10. Lévi-Strauss, The Scope of Anthropology, trans. Sherry Ortner Paul and Robert A. Paul (Cape Editions, London 1967), p.14.

Pelele is of fundamental importance, both as a symbol of suffering and alienation,<sup>11</sup> and as the consciousness most clearly examined by the author prior to the unravelling of the principal themes. Pelele's world is a microcosm of the world Asturias tries to create in the novel as a whole:

Medio en la realidad, medio en el sueño, corría el Pelele perseguido por los perros y por los clavos de una lluvia fina. (p.203)

Pelele (the choice of name should be noted: also the implicit and explicit parallels with Christ) is simple-minded, and has been driven into virtual madness by the cruelty of his fellow men. His role is symbolic in the sense that he is persecuted by almost everybody in the novel, just as everybody else goes in constant terror of the President. These two characters are therefore at the two extremes of cruelty and suffering: everyone else falls somewhere in between, and surely all those who persecute the idiot deserve to be treated in the same way. Pelele's perception of reality has become permanently distorted, and the passage above shows that he is as much afraid of falling rain as of the real menace of the dogs that chase him through the streets. Half-real, half-unreal, his world is intolerable precisely because it is neither one thing nor the other, and this statement of ambivalence gives concrete expression to the most important opposition of the whole novel, that between two planes, the real and the unreal. Pelele frequently defends himself against things whose only threat to him is invented by the abnormal association patterns of his own deranged mind. Some time after he has been attacked by a vulture, which causes him to stumble and break his leg, the continuing pain keeps the image of the vulture in his mind,

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11. See Yvette Jiménez de Baez, "El Pelele, un personaje-símbolo de Miguel Angel Asturias", Anuario de Filología (Universidad del Zulia, Maracaibo, Venezuela), nos.6-7 (1967-68), pp.319-35.

and he defends himself against the pain as if it were the vulture:

El idiota luchaba con el fantasma del zopilote que sentía encima y con el dolor de una pierna rota... (p.205)

Similarly, Asturias gives his readers to understand that Pelele attributes an attack of hiccoughs to the same source:

El hipo lo picoteaba... (p.216)

Although Pelele himself is indeed mad, there is only a marginal difference of degree between the workings of his mind, and the nature of dreams and fantasies in more normal people. The novel as a whole must be seen in terms of an alternation between the real and the unreal, which largely correspond to the conscious and unconscious in the human psyche, and there are innumerable individual examples pointing the pattern of the whole:

Sin dejar la carga, más le pesaba el miedo... (p.212, my italics)

The wholeness of psychic processes is suggested by our use of physical terms to express mental states. One of the burdens here is tangible and the other is not. They are linked by the word pesaba, whose relation to the one is logical and direct, and to the other metaphorical, and this is the relation of the first plane to the second. Metaphor and symbol are essentially the language of the unconscious, through which it communicates with the conscious mind. To dramatise the correspondence between the real and the unreal as Asturias does here is to create melodrama (a form of esperpento):

...un carricoche tirado por dos caballos flacos, que llevaba de lumbre en los faros los ojos de la muerte. (p.202)

The lamps on the Ajditor's coach are real enough, but the image refers them to another, unreal plane, thematically attuned to the level of the plot itself. In this case the image can be attributed directly to the author, but on other



occasions he uses images as a way into the psychology of the characters themselves:

De miedo, de frío, y de hambre lloraban los mendigos apañuscados en la sombra. No se veían ni las manos. A veces quedábanse aletargados y corría entre ellos, como buscando salida, la respiración de la sordomuda encinta. (p.199)

It is almost as painful to hear someone else breathing with difficulty as it is to be in that predicament oneself (similar is the contagiousness of yawning), and this adds a claustrophobic note to the already tense situation in the cell. The truth is that only the deaf-mute woman--being pregnant and frightened--is having trouble in breathing, but Asturias projects this fact outwards into the collective situation of all the beggars in the prison cell, and the breath so painfully expelled by one person is given an autonomous, concrete role which is representative of the feelings of the whole group, as each of them feels it. Irreality is essentially individual and subjective: it isolates its percipient. El Señor Presidente is a novel whose characters are almost all in the same grim predicament, and yet each one of them is lonely and isolated from the rest of his fellows in the midst of violence and terror. In the absence of light and hope, as in the case of the beggars, or of human companionship, the individual's groping mind begins to fashion its own world, which does not correspond to reality as we normally know it.

A frequent recourse of Asturias' is to personification as the most direct means of metamorphosing our familiar world. As the real world is left behind in the dark, the obscure reservoir of the unconscious begins to people the human imagination with strange presences, and inanimate phenomena take on a life of their own. The city itself takes on all kinds of guises:

La ciudad arañaba el cielo con las uñas sucias de los tejados... (pp.503-504)

At times it ceases even to be humanised:

Los horizontes recogían sus cabecitas en las calles de la ciudad, caracol de mil cabezas. (p.204)

The wind that sweeps through the streets is a malevolent personage:

...el viento que mordía hiel para soplar de noche. (p.216)

Las hojas secas tronaban en el anochecer como con miedo del viento que las iba arrasando. (p.447)

The weather, so often invoked to give an orienting sense of normality and temporality to the first plane (where day-time is usually assumed), becomes anthropomorphised and intemporal on the second plane:

Las noches de abril son en el trópico las viudas de los días cálidos de marzo, oscuras, frías, despeinadas, tristes. (p.265)

La noche traía la lengua fuera. (p.406)

Though there are moments in the novel (esp.chapter 34, "Luz para ciegos") when irreality is a positive force, expressing the gleaming possibilities of life to those who have lost or are about to lose them, the day-time is usually associated with reality and the night with obscure irreality:

Y el aire botando el pelo negro de la noche, el pelo de los muertos, para tocarse con peluca rubia. (p.283)

However, personification has another function. In a world where normal relationships are almost entirely absent, it provides a series of presences which give the novel a strange kind of equilibrium. No human being weeps for Pelele's death, but he does not go unnoticed:

Por él lloraban los mingitorios públicos y el viento metía ruido de zopilotes en los árboles del parque. (p.246)

At the moment of his murder the shots cause a great commotion, and personified forces tell in anticipation the react-

ion of such human observers as Don Benjamín and Dona Venjamón, who eventually peep out of their houses through sheer curiosity. The inanimate objects are brought to life to express the unhealthy interest which characterises the reactions of most of us on such occasions:

...mal vestidas de luna corrían las calles por las calles sin saber bien lo que había sucedido y los árboles de la plaza se tronaban los dedos en la pena de no poder decir con el viento, por los hilos telefónicos, lo que acababa de pasar. Las calles asomaban a las esquinas preguntándose por el lugar del crimen y, como desorientadas, unas corrían hacia los barrios céntricos y otros hacia los arrabales.

Una confusa palpitación de sien herida por los disparos tenía el viento, que no lograba arrancar a soplidos las ideas fijas de las hojas de la cabeza de los árboles. (pp.243-44)

Again, elements in the city provide the reaction that the terrified citizens themselves cannot or will not provide, and also re-enact the kind of gossiping that we get in other parts of the novel. In this case the rapidly shifting point of view creates a whirlwind of activity to express the mingled horror and excitement which violence stirs in the human soul. At times Asturias goes even further, and dehumanises a character in relation to the inanimate surroundings:

Los árboles barrieron una sombra hacia un carruaje, una sombra que apenas puso el pie en el estribo regresó como loca a ver si le valía la última súplica. (p.447)

Finally, the most important personification is probably that of El Sueño:

El Sueño, señor que surca los mares oscuros de la realidad... (p.357)

This is a clear reference to the unconscious as it has generally been understood by modern psychology. In a sense, Asturias is here personifying his own use of dream mechanisms as a literary device. Indeed, in chapter 22, when Cara de Angel falls asleep, El Sueño actually decides in

which ship--of fate, presumably--Cara de Angel and Camila should be placed, thereby setting up an internal fatalism which predetermines their future course. Cara de Angel is placed in one vessel, and Camila in another, the boat of "enamoradas que no serán felices" (p.359).

Anthropomorphic images such as these are a constant of our ordinary speech, and are a conventional literary device, an attribute of "style". Asturias, however, makes an interlocking system of them to reduce the importance of consciousness and to construct and contrast his two parallel planes. The concrete situation on the real plane is that of a succession of characters enduring a life of suffering in a city prostrated by a clearly specified type of political regime. The characters are deliberately chosen as types to create a comprehensive picture of the effect of this regime on a whole society. On this level their experience is that of "ordinary", everyday life. However, there is a second plane, in which the regime is given a more universal, almost supernatural reality.

Where on the first plane the President's regime is portrayed as an earthly aberration acting upon an earthly city, the second plane creates an atmosphere in which the characters become essence personalities, abstracts of human emotions and attitudes whose source is the collective unconscious; and these essence personalities dwell in a city dominated by supernatural terrors, so that the evil of the dictatorship appears to flow from some kind of pool of eternal malevolence. Expressed in this simplified fashion, the novel might seem to lack cohesion, and possibly to correspond to a somewhat immature or romanticised conception, but this is not the case: one is always on dangerous ground in trying to describe the effects of a lyrical novel because they reside in the language itself and are nowhere "explained" or externalised. In fact, the two planes are constantly merging, and the correspondence between them is extremely subtle.

Having said that the characters are living their "ordinary" everyday lives under the threat of terrorism, it should be added that not even ordinary lives are consistently ordinary, least of all under these circumstances. We have no choice but to submit to the world of sensation, and we all of us experience moments of intensity when the emotional phenomena begin to control us, instead of the usual (more apparent than real, perhaps) reverse situation. At times of love, joy, sorrow, anguish and terror, or during fits of lunacy or drunkenness, the characters in the novel seem to move from the ordinarily concrete plane of the real world to the intangible, yet in a sense even more concrete, plane of the unreal, from the normal to the abnormal, the earthly to the supernatural (an exteriorisation of their own psychic processes: Jung says that the modern world has come to call the Devil by a new name, "neurosis"). Imperceptibly the reader is led to accept that the intensity of imagination, emotion, hallucinations, or memory, can invade consciousness in a world where they are as real as any other phenomena.

At these moments Asturias' methods vary, with the functional exploitation of such familiar devices as the stream-of-consciousness and interior monologue. The novel is so complex, with such an imposing sense of diversity and so many interweaving themes, that the correspondence between the two planes can, and usually does, go unperceived. Asturias' attempt to achieve a synthetic vision of a given situation is carried through within, rather than by, the language itself. The rational and emotional division within our psychic organisation is reproduced in language, and Asturias' style creates a subtle balance between the rationalistically oriented vision of normal waking consciousness, and the irrational view that stems from the unconscious. By giving a representation which in effect implies both the wholeness and div-

orce of rational and non-rational perception in modern man, he produces at once a division and a fusion of his two planes on both the individual and collective fronts.

Very much in the way that environmental forces shaped personality in the naturalist novel, the thematically attuned "background" elements of El Señor Presidente give form to its characters and plot line: but the principle is not one of historical causality, but rather a question of the kinds of relationships that can be established between formal motifs and words themselves. So homogeneous is the conception of this novel that all its elements are essential--there is no question of purely stylistic adornments or incidental episodes--, for each of them relates to a range of other elements. There is no purely anecdotic material,, no philosophical discussion, no delays for the purpose of painting varying settings. Everything relates to the single yo and circunstancia isolated above.

All elements exist, then, on the two theoretical levels we have detected: the city, the President, and all the minor characters. The central character, Cara de Angel, is naturally the best illustration. Let us note what Asturias writes as Cara de Angel leaves the presidential palace, charged with the mission of trapping General Canales:

El favorito salió con media cara cubierta en  
la bufanda negra. (Era bello y malo como Satán).  
(p.226)

The aside in parentheses (these were only added in later editions of the novel) at once places Cara de Angel on a level of significance beyond that of normal reality. It is repeated on four occasions, during each of which he is acting out his public role as the President's favourite aide. The inference is that this character is to be regarded as somehow different in quality from others in the novel. It will be seen that this special quality allows

for the closer union in him of the real and unreal planes which otherwise dance accompaniment to one another: it will also permit him to be used both as an instrument of the plot on the one hand, and as the key to the ultimate pattern of the novel on the other. Thus, "El favorito salió con media cara cubierta en la bufanda negra", relates to reality. The addition, "(Era bello y malo como Satán)", besides the information it gives us, is the expression of an essence which, though suggested by the first statement, does not relate to the concrete situation as such, but rather to the web of background forces. As such it provides one of the keys for opening up this novel.

### The Dimensions of Human Life

We have now discussed (1) how Asturias establishes, by his use of language, the innate structure of the human mind and the nature of perception; (2) how he shows the way the human mind itself in fact works through language, and the way metaphor and symbol relate to the unconscious. It is language that differentiates or unites the two principal planes in the novel, and it is time now to examine the wider effects of this conception on the development of the narrative. The separation of the planes is a constant, both in the wider attitude to existence, in which they correspond generally to the division of the conscious and the unconscious, and in the treatment of the plot and the determining themes. The essentially literary effect of this conception on the pattern of the novel must now be examined, and to do this we must first examine a second total vision (Cara de Angel's train journey was the first), which happens to be the opening of the novel:

...¡Alumbra, lumbré de alumbra, Luzbel de piedralumbra! Como zumbido de oídos persistía el rumor de las campanas a la oración, maldobestar de la luz en la sombra, de la sombra en la luz. ¡Alumbra, lumbré de alumbra, Luzbel de piedralumbra, sobre la podredumbra! ¡Alumbra, lumbré de a-

lumbra, lumbré de alumbre, sobre la podredumbre, Luzbel de piedralumbre! ¡Alumbra, alumbra, lumbré de alumbre..., alumbra, lumbré de alumbre..., alumbra, alumbre.... (p.189)

Here, in the very first paragraph, there is a fusion of elements which is a kind of microcosm of the thematic syntheses achieved by the novel as a whole. Light and darkness, evil and--though only suggested by association--goodness, alternate within the sound of the bells. The relation of the President and his regime to Lucifer and his regime is clearly established, and likewise the all-pervading atmosphere of terror and corruption. More than this, though, the kind of literary operation to be employed is equally clearly established: "maldoblesar de la luz en la sombra, de la sombra en la luz..." Asturias' Spanish heritage appears most clearly in his love of contrast. The juxtaposition here of light and darkness, mingled in sensation with the movement and sound of the bells, becomes a pattern which finds echoes throughout the novel, with the eventual triumph of darkness:

¡Chiplongón!... Zambulléronse las campanadas de las ocho de la noche en el silencio...  
¡Chiplongón!... ¡Chiplongón!... (p.531)

The light-shade polarity is the principal one, corresponding in part of course to the good-evil antithesis,<sup>12</sup> though these are only two sets of interacting contrasts among many: it also signifies consciousness and the unconscious. The action moves to the accompaniment of flurries of metaphors, which create sly antitheses whose elements find their focus, as has been suggested, in Cara de Angel, an anti-hero both as beautiful and as evil as Satan. As love purifies his soul and the recognition of the Presid-

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12. See Yepes-Boscán, op.cit., p.111: "La estructura de fondo de El Señor Presidente está dada por la inversión del valor de los signos éticos, codificados en el mito de la caída del ángel." This view is something of a simplification, but suggests that plot does indeed have a secondary role in this novel.



ent's true significance brings a kind of moral redemption, so light triumphs inside him (thereby successfully uniting goodness and consciousness on this occasion), and the darkness without moves to destroy him. Cara de Angel is in a sense a static figure, as all the characters are: it is good and evil, and other themes, which are the mobile elements in the novel.

Both in the case of Cara de Angel and of the novel as a whole, the alternation of light and shade, which is in practice a temporal conception, ends with a triumph of darkness, a triumph which has seemed inevitable from the beginning. A review of the English translation of El Señor Presidente by The Times, though disparaging in intention, fixes the impression quite precisely:

The story unfolds in flickering black and white scenes, like a very ancient film. (13)

The comment is interesting, not only for its direct reference to the alternation effect, and its implicit suggestion that the light is always on the point of going out, but also for its mention of the early cinema, with which the novel does indeed have much in common. Asturias himself is clearly influenced by techniques of the cinema, which was in first vogue when he began to write his novel, and mention has already been made to his comparison of the sea to the world of the cinema. Unlike a novel, which can always be read slowly or quickly, or by instalments, the experience of the motion picture creates an essentially temporal world, which begins with darkness, lasts a certain period in which light and darkness alternate between and within its images, and then ends in darkness again.

However, looked at from another point of view, the

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13. The Times, 10 October 1963, p.15.

alternation of light and darkness can be considered not as a temporal concept, but as a spatial one. The triumph of darkness may occur because there is more darkness than light. Day may only emerge because it has won a temporary battle with night, which is identified with death:

El peso de los muertos hace girar la tierra  
de noche y de día el peso de los vivos...  
Cuando sean mas los muertos que los vivos, la  
noche será eterna, no tendrá fin... (p.448)

This concreteness is suggested by the semantics of our own language. We talk of day "breaking", night "falling". Asturias analyses this kind of intuition into a positive force:

¿De dónde saldrá tanta oscuridad...? (p.448)

Night is here not the complement of day, but its enemy. Darkness is conceived not as an absence of light, but as a positive force attempting to smother it. This fundamental shift in conception is part of the construction of the multiple point of view from which the novel is developed, and shows how comprehensive is Asturias' implicit examination of our attitudes to reality. Naturally, the temporal view of the light-shade alternation corresponds initially to the progression already mentioned in connection with Asturias' presentation of ordinary reality, and therefore to a relatively conventional plot development; whereas the spatial view takes its substance from the unreal, because timeless and unknowable world of the unconscious, and therefore contributes to the static pattern of the finished work.

Both conceptions find echoes in other aspects of the novel. For instance, there are repeated references to religious matters from the moment when the bells ring out to invite the faithful to mass. Apart from its function as an illustration of the thorough corruption of the regime, the religious motif in a sense aids the temporal alternat-

ion. Time and again different characters pray to effigies of the Virgin or other saintly figures, and their prayers lend a kind of rise and fall to the novel by evoking moments of hope, or light, which are then extinguished. This failure, of course, makes the returning darkness all the more dismaying.

Equally, there are many examples of the use of spatial concepts:

El silencio ordeñaba el eco espeso de los pasos. (p.235)

In this case the menacing silence swallows up the only sound made by Vásquez and Rodas as they set off en route to murder Pelele. Later Cara de Angel, surprisingly enough, describes his sexual frustration as an emptiness which requires to be filled (p.353). Existence is conceived as a series of emptinesses or nuclei of possibility (p.203, "la nada del mundo recreado en cada amanecer") which may be filled by a variety of opposing elements, one of which must triumph in each case.

We have now moved the long distance from an examination of man's psychic processes themselves to an analysis of the external world which is the subject of those processes, and which in a sense only exists through them, on the terms they impose:

...los árboles recién inflados de aire vegetal verde, y ...los pedacitos de carne envueltos en plumas de colores que volaban más ligero que el eco. (p.475)

Asturias' use of antithesis can be an analysis of the very tissue of reality in very few words. The parallel inflado-envuelto is concerned with the problem of form and substance. The trees are filled with the substance of growth, whilst the birds are clothed in bright feathers. The evident contrasts and paradoxes here can all be attributed to the choice of language, which prompts the reader uncon-

ciously to examine more closely his own view of reality. The problem of form and content is fundamental to the whole question of literature, and in particular to the work of Asturias, whose novels tend always to produce a fusion of the two aspects at every level of the text. It is especially important here, since the indication of the life substance to be found in all living organisms refers us to an aspect of the novel which illuminates the division of the real and unreal planes far more clearly. Departing no doubt from some such principle as Jung's collective unconscious, Asturias seems to hint at the existence of a whole series of amorphous forces which flow in and out of both the conscious and unconscious elements of the novel, reminding one of Keyserling's highly influential interpretations of Latin America's "swamp-like reality" in the thirties. It is as if the elements of the novel were swirling around together, distinguishable only by their endlessly superimposed outlines, like the tiny pond creatures that can be seen pulsating under a microscope.

This atmosphere is decisively established in the first chapter of the novel. When Asturias writes that the night is "oscura, navegable, sin fondo" (p.194), or that the streets are "tan anchas como mares" (p.189), he is relieving the city of its normal solidity and creating an underlying sense of depth and flow which prepares us for the spatial and temporal cross-currents which are to be so important. The fusion of the flickering alternation of tiny fragments with the more rhythmical ebb and flow of amorphous forces invests the novel with a complexity which its subject matter would not otherwise lend, and gradually sketches in the hidden guide-lines on which the broad pattern of the novel as a whole can be imprinted.

## 2. SOCIETY AND THE INDIVIDUAL

### The Social System

Having isolated some of Asturias' technical responses to his vision of human existence as perceived by the psyche (total reality), the corresponding vision of the social situation may now be examined. We have already seen that the novel is concerned with a collective reality of a special kind, one that can only be built up from the multiple experience of a circle of isolated individuals.

The primary representation of man's vision of life in general carries with it the implicit problem of attempting to find meaning and purpose among the myriad manifestations of existence. Once the social element appears, and the undetermined particles materialise in the shape of the particular Guatemalan situation, the problem of meaning and finality becomes coupled with its corollary, the essentially moral problem associated with one's relation to one's fellows, and to good and evil. It is, as we shall see, bound up with the problem of truth. It is this subtle correspondence between existential problems on the one hand, and moral ones on the other, sealed by the functionalism of the author's art, which gives such complete synthesis to the novel. Its apparent anarchy reflects the apparent anarchy of life; but a pattern is there, constantly suggested in the eddying flow of the language, and finally imprinted by the movement of the plot.

Carlos Navarro has shown that the regime works for the destruction of normal human life, and the intimate relationships that go with it. To this end the President's activities are highly systematic, and involve a keen insight into human psychology. The President himself sums

it up:

¡La muerte ha sido y será siempre mi mejor aliada...! (p.495)

The Auditor, his most ruthless and most inhuman servant, enlarges upon the techniques required:

En estos puestos se mantiene uno porque hace lo que le ordenan y la regla de conducta del Señor Presidente es no dar esperanzas y pisotearlos y zurrarse en todos porque sí. (p.467)

Finally, Cara de Angel and Major Farfán, pondering on the best means to obtaining presidential favour, come up with the following suggestions:

..."cometer un delito", por ejemplo, medio el más eficaz para captarse la buena voluntad del mandatorio; o "ultrajar públicamente a las personas indefensas"; o "hacer sentir la superioridad de la fuerza sobre la opinión del país" o "enriquecerse a costillas de la Nación"; o...

El delito de la sangre era ideal; la supresión de un prójimo constituía la adhesión más completa del ciudadano al Señor Presidente. Dos meses de cárcel para cubrir las apariencias, derechito después a un puesto público de los de confianza, lo que sólo se dispensaba a servidores con proceso pendiente, por la comodidad de devolverlos a la cárcel conforme a la ley, si no se portaban bien. (pp.395-96)

Here Latin American official language is used to uncover, rather than conceal, the machinations of shady political manoeuvring. Minuscule theories like these, or fragments of them, appear throughout the novel. Again they represent principles which the events of the narrative show executed in practice on every page. In contrast to the kinds of immediate sensorial recognition mentioned earlier they constitute a kind of intellectual recognition. It is interesting that conscious expression of ideas such as these comes generally late in the novel, underlining conclusions which have evolved slowly in the reader's mind, whereas suggestions of the kind of formal proced-

ure to be followed appear early on, and are expressed in poetic form, so that they can expand into the various intertwining themes which are to dominate.

The systematic social structure we have seen described so explicitly by these different characters (and which we shall later see from the point of view of its hapless sufferers) is also suggested, like everything else, on the second, unreal or supernatural plane, and is conceived as:

...el bosque monstruoso que separaba al Señor Presidente de sus enemigos, bosque de árboles de orejas que al menor eco se revolvían como agitadas por el huracán. Ni una brizna de ruido quedaba leguas a la redonda con el hambre de aquellos millones de cartílagos.... Una red de hilos invisibles, más invisibles que los hilos del telégrafo, comunicaba cada hoja con el Señor Presidente, atento a lo que pasaba en las vísceras más secretas de los ciudadanos. (p.227)

This sensitive system can be seen at work throughout, in the machinations of circles of spies, gossips, and other members, or would-be members, of the "círculo de amigos del Señor Presidente". These are the only cohesive groups in the novel, giving the regime itself a certain finished structure which the terrorised citizens have quite lost. They divide into more or less passive and cowardly victims, or impotent rebels.

The only real flicker of hope is provided by the student, who is finally released from prison, along with the sacristan who has kept him company since chapter two, at the end of the narrative. The Epilogue traces his steps as he walks home. It would not be audacious to see in him a projection of the youthful Asturias who was himself briefly imprisoned by Estrada Cabrera.<sup>14</sup> Equally, it may be

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14. Atilio Jorge Castelpoggi, Miguel Angel Asturias (Editorial La Mandrágora, Buenos Aires 1961), p.15.

that the old "4th Prisoner" whose voice is heard in chapter 28 ("Habla en la sombra") is the older and wiser Asturias who completed the writing of the novel. The old man is wholly disillusioned:

...isomos un pueblo maldito! Las voces  
del cielo nos gritan cuando truena: "¡Vi-  
les! ¡Inmundos! ¡Cómplices de iniquidad!"  
(p.427)

But tears of joy come to his eyes when the student, scorning the sacristan's suggestion that they might try praying for release, opts for violent revolution. Nevertheless, if the youth of the country is the only hope, the novel ends on a dark note. The student arrives at his home (p.531, "situada al final de una calle sin salida") and hears his mother praying earnestly. Clearly nothing can be expected to change, and the book is concluded anticlimactically on the words "Kyrie eleison..." There is a revolution in the novel, of course, but it proves abortive when General Canales dies. The first brief step in his "revolución total" (p.417) is when he murders the unscrupulous doctor of Las Aldeas; but this is a rare moment of justice.

Or is it? It is time now to examine more closely the central theme of the novel, to which frequent allusions have been made. By following the argument through, we shall be able incidentally to see that besides the existential and moral problems thus far examined, El Señor Presidente provides a very clear illustration of the articulation of such traditional literary divisions as form, content and theme. All novels depend ultimately on the latter, their central theme, which is always at bottom a simple matter (one word, as Percy Lubbock said).<sup>15</sup> Many critics suggest that this one word is "fear" in the case

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15. The Craft of Fiction (Cape, London 1921), pp.41-2.



of Asturias' work, whilst others argue that it is "evil", a view shared by the present writer, since the fear is merely a reaction to the evil.

We have shown the correlation of theory and practice in the existential view already discussed, and have seen a parallel division in the presentation of the social situation which is the basis of the hecho central. The first of these involved the individual's perception of life (unformed as yet into a determinate attitude to finality), with its elements of reality and irreality indicated in Asturias' use of formal techniques. The second stemmed from the first, and was expressed in terms of it, showing the particular collective form these elements took in Guatemala under Estrada Cabrera. The two aspects are fused in the presentation of the central theme, the problem of evil, which, simplifying a little, one might regard as presented formally in terms of the first aspect, whilst referring in significance to the second. We are given an allegorical picture of the presidential regime which relies on the alternation of reality and fantasy to underline its objective and subjective characteristics. But before going on to examine these alternative views of the presidential regime we should substantiate our affirmation of what the theme is, revealing at the same time the way in which Asturias signposts his path to the central Tohil scene.

The fear which characterises the emotional tenor of the narrative is only a manifestation of evil. How else is one to explain the unceasing flow of cruelty and hatred among men to be seen on almost every page of the novel? The opening paragraph rings out the message of the Devil, and Asturias thereupon makes the following comment on the beggars who scurry to their sleeping quarters in the main square, directly below the rolling bells:

Nunca se supo que se socorrieran entre ellos:  
avaros de sus desperdicios, como todo mendigo,  
preferían darlos a los perros que a sus compañeros de infortunio. (p.190)

Pelele is a symbol of suffering. In life no one ever cares about him:

Lo echaban de los templos, de las tiendas, de todas partes, sin atender a su fatiga de bestia ni a sus ojos que a pesar de su inconsciencia con la mirada suplicaban perdón ... Seguido de chiquillos se refugiaba en los barrios pobres, aunque allí su suerte era más dura... no sólo lo insultaban, sino al verlo correr despavorido, le arrojaban piedras, ratas muertas y latas vacías. (p.193)

And when he is murdered, only the public lavatories weep for him, as we have seen. Don Benjamín, the puppeteer, takes a cue from Pelele's death and puts on little tragedies with puppets that actually weep, thinking that the children will find this moving:

Don Benjamín creyó que los niños llorarían con aquellas comedias picadas de un sentido de pena y su sorpresa no tuvo límites cuando los vió reír con más ganas, a mandíbula batiendo, con más alegría que antes. Los niños reían de ver llorar... Los niños reían de ver pegar... (p.247)

The children are obviously going to grow up to be just like their parents:

...un patio grande rodeado de máscaras, que luego se fijó que eran caras atentas a la pelea de los gallos. Llama de papel fue la pelea. Uno de los exponentes expiró sin agonía bajo la mirada vidriosa de los espectadores, felices de ver salir las navajas en arco embarradas de sangre. (p.208)

In the meantime, members of the younger generation manage to find their own amusements:

Grupos de muchachos se divertían en las esquinas con los ronrones que atraídos por la luz revoloteaban alrededor de los focos eléctricos. Insecto cazado era sometido a una serie de torturas que prolongaban los más belitres a falta de un piadoso que le pusiera el pie para acabar de una vez. (p.248)

Almost nobody in the novel reacts against the general

climate of violence and injustice until it affects them personally. The case of General Canales is typical. Like Cara de Angel, whom we shall be discussing in a moment, he only sees the light when he is himself victimised by the President. As he escapes we are provided with a comment half his and half the author's, which again reinforces our argument:

Canales volvía la cabeza a todos lados, perdido en medio de aquella naturaleza fatídica, inabordable y destructora como el alma de su raza. (p.419)

Finally, let us examine the moral trajectory of Miguel Cara de Angel, the character in whom all the forces of this novel find focus, and the only one whose thoughts ever stray even briefly from the moment at hand. Cara de Angel seems an entirely paradoxical figure, just as the novel itself seems paradoxical. He has masculine eyes and a feminine mouth, is beautiful and evil, just as Satan was, yet has the appearance of an angel. He is of course a romanticised figure and we are dealing with a melodramatic novel.<sup>16</sup> His first appearance is in the scene where he helps the leñatero drag Pelele off the rubbish tip and gives him money to take the unconscious beggar for treatment. The leñatero pockets the money, abandons Pelele, and goes home to tell his wife he has been talking to an angel.

The next time we see Cara de Angel he has become a Satanic figure, as he goes to see the President in chapter 6 ("La cabeza de un general") and assumes his public role. The thematic relevance of the angel-devil antithesis needs

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16. There are several Byronic references to Cara de Angel's eyes: P.308, "Un relámpago de cólera cruzó las noches profundas que llevaba Cara de Angel en los ojos"; p.333, "aquel hombre cuyos ojos negros despedían fosforescencias diabólicos, como los de los gatos"; p.380, "Doña Chón lo había conocido por los ojos de Satanás". Similarly, Camila's eyes are green, traditionally the Romantic colour for evil. To complete the picture of Romantic symmetry, Camila lives alone with her father at the opening of the novel, whilst all CA's past memories are of his mother.

no stressing. For the moment, however, we must concentrate on the "real" plane of human behaviour to discern his primary level of significance. He is intelligent, highly self-confident, and ruthless ("sin entrañas", p. 265), a strange mixture of venality and arrogance. Often disgusted by the cowardly prostration and unmitigated corruption of the President's other followers, he is nevertheless the despot's own favourite, and one of his principal instruments of evil.

At the opening of the novel he seems to be entirely at home in the murky world he has chosen for himself; but when sent to execute the President's plan for trapping General Canales, it is clear that doubts are beginning to enter his mind. The initial reason is the attraction he feels for Camila. He feels that his part in the plot against Canales denies him the "right" to her. He muses that he is "un instrumento ciego" (p.266), but nothing could be further from the truth. No one could have his eyes more widely open. This idea is merely an oblique manifestation of an emerging sense of conscience, as he begins to tire of his public persona and feels the need for something better:

Un viento extraño corría por la planicie de su silencio. Una vegetación salvaje alzabase con sed de pestañas sin llanto, esa sed de los cactus espinosos, esa sed de los árboles que no mitiga el agua del cielo. (¿Por qué será así el deseo? ¿Por qué los árboles bajo la lluvia tienen sed?) (p.206) n.17

Is Cara de Angel a fallen angel on the way back to redemption? Even he is susceptible to the fundamental life force:

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17. The continuation in parenthesis appears in later editions of the novel, but not in the 1955 Obras escogidas I, from which all quotations are otherwise taken.

Sus grandes ojos negros seguían de mue-  
ble en mueble el pensamiento que con in-  
sistencia de mosca le asaltaba en los mo-  
mentos decisivos: tener mujer e hijos. (p.268)<sup>18</sup>

At this point he is torn by two conflicting emotions: the desire of the sexual libertine and the wish for a wholesome family life. He embarks upon his relationship with Camila under the influence of the first motive, which gradually merges into the second as he falls in love. It seems, then, that Cara de Angel is indeed on the road to moral redemption, and in a sense he is. But if his redemption were a complete one, how should we explain his horrifying end? It gives equilibrium to the novel, as we shall see, but to be content with this would be to ignore several fundamental details. Asturias almost never comments directly on his characters. He comments indirectly on Cara de Angel through his thoughts, but leaves his actions to speak for themselves. Can it be said that they are the actions of a man who deserves to be saved by his author?

After abducting Camila he soon repents of his urge to rape her and quickly falls in love. When she realises that, far from having intended to save her, he has taken her for himself, her rejection provokes in him a desperate and acute crisis of conscience, not to say consciousness, which continues throughout Camila's subsequent illness. However, this change of heart goes only so far--as far as Camila, in fact--as several incidents in chapters 24 and 25 clearly show. Cara de Angel becomes obsessed by the primitive idea that to save Camila's life he must perform

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18. For R.J.Callan, "Fecundity in Two Novels of Miguel Angel Asturias" (Unpubd. Ph.D diss., University of Saint Louis, 1965), this is the central theme of the novel. Even were Callan's view acceptable it would be a considerable simplification: as it is, his whole thesis is based on arbitrary evidence from the text and wildly imaginative proofs from Greek and Babylonian (not Mayan) mythology.

some good deed, and decides to visit Major Farfán in the "Diente de Oro" brothel to warn him that his life is in danger. Unfortunately, this can hardly be regarded as a disinterested action.

While in the brothel he is caught in conversation with its proprietress, Doña Chón, who idly mentions the fate of Fedina Rodas, her latest recruit. Cara de Angel's first reaction is one of horror, not at the substance of the dreadful story in itself, but at the thought that this hapless woman may well be La Chabelona, Camila's old servant, for whom the girl has expressed concern. This is ironic in two respects. Firstly, La Chabelona is dead already after having her skull split open, largely as a result of Cara de Angel himself having thrown her to the ground during the abduction of Camila. Secondly, although Cara de Angel does not know it, Fedina is in fact well acquainted with Camila, who was recently madrina to her baby (see p.254): however, when he realises that Doña Chón is talking not about La Chabelona, but about someone quite different, his only reaction is a feeling of profound relief and he loses all interest in the other woman's terrible fate, for which, again, he is in large measure to blame. All these undercurrents are much more subtle than is generally thought, and must be handled with care.

Thus even after he falls in love Cara de Angel's concern is really only for those close to him.<sup>19</sup> Of all the characters in the novel only one, El Mosco, performs a purely disinterested act of nobility. The falseness of Cara de Angel's position is clearly underlined when he

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19. See Arquitectura de la vida nueva (Guatemala, 1927), in which Asturias discusses various aspects of the Guatemalan character and national problems. He mentions as of fundamental importance the Latin tendency to reduce all problems to the family level with a consequent inability to co-operate effectively at the social level. Forty years later, concern for familia or compadre continues to accompany a general absence of social conscience or commitment.

execrates as "fábricas ambulantes de excrementos" (p.389) all those people who go about their ordinary lives indifferent to or ignorant of Camila's illness. This is the greatest irony of all. Cara de Angel has never cared about anyone, and he now finds himself on the receiving end of man's cruelty (or indifference) to man for the first time. Here again Asturias declines to comment, misleading some critics into accepting what Cara de Angel says, instead of placing it within the logical structure of the novel as a whole.<sup>20</sup> Cara de Angel, though torn by the conflicts which arise as a pure love begins to light up the impurity of his soul, has failed to differentiate his motives, and he never manages to bring the evolution undergone by his emotions to full consciousness.

Following his good deeds he finally marries Camila on the advice of the spiritualist Tícher as a last hope of saving her life: and she survives. For a while they live an idyllic existence together, but reality soon begins to crowd in on them. Although now avoiding the President as much as possible, Cara de Angel still flatters him in his presence. It is striking that he never once defies his master:

Se tuvo asco. Seguía siendo el perro educado, intelectual, contento de su ración de mugre, del instinto que le conservaba la vida. (p.452)

Love has created a sense of responsibility and a consciousness of value in Cara de Angel, and has made him look again at himself; but it is too late to escape the web of corruption and intrigue. Once the President becomes an obstacle to his own happiness Cara de Angel probably finds him more repugnant than anyone else, but the situation is no more than he deserves. It is not the President who has changed.

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20. The whole of Seymour Menton's chapter on Asturias in Historia crítica de la novela guatemalteca (Editorial Universitaria, Guatemala 1960) founders on this error.

And there is still another aspect that no one has yet mentioned which needs elucidation. It seems that Camila never realises that Cara de Angel was the principal agent in the plot to have her father killed, nor that he actually used her to help lead Canales into the trap. (The fact that the President was not, as it happened, prepared to have Canales murdered immediately does not affect our argument, since Cara de Angel was not aware of it.) She comes to realise that he abducted, rather than rescued, her, but she never knows that he was on the point of raping her. In short, Camila never realises that she is married to a man who was instrumental in her father's misfortune or that he was actually planning to violate her, despite his knowledge that she was little more than a child. The whole basis of their marriage is evidently false, and Camila never knows how just is the fate that finally befalls her husband. However, the pattern in the novel has Cara de Angel expiate with poetic justice. He is trapped in the same way that Canales was to be trapped, deceived by a supposed friend into capture. And then, again as in the case of Canales, a false message telling of Camila's alleged infidelity kills him off. Having begun the novel as a romantic, almost supernatural personage, he ends it as the anonymous "Prisionero del 17". His projected journey to Washington amounts to an attempt to escape from his own past, but too late.

Despite the fact that he appears in 20 out of the 41 chapters, the novel is not "about" Cara de Angel, as must be clear by now, though it is in him that the real problems take individual form and consciousness. The real theme of the novel is not, we repeat, dictatorship, nor even fear, its inevitable result, but something anterior to either of these: evil. This is suggested in the treatment of the President himself, where our distinction of



the two fundamental planes is to be seen at its most useful. If the reality painted by the novel is so distressing, who is to blame for the evil behind it? The President, seems the obvious answer, and is the one most frequently offered, in an interpretation which sees this novel as an attack on one historical personage, Manuel Estrada Cabrera. A little more subtly, it may be argued that this particular dictator is not the only unscrupulous politician on this or any other continent, so that it is presumably the social system involved which must take the blame for the creation of the dictatorial phenomenon. But the social system can hardly be to blame for all the kinds of cruelty and indifference which Asturias repeatedly presents in this novel. The problem must at bottom be an individual one.

It seems evident, in short, that the dominant theme of El Señor Presidente must be the omnipresence of evil and its corrosive effect upon human existence. That the President is only part of a wider pool of moral corruption is clear from the ambivalent attitude displayed by the author towards him. On one plane he is clearly exculpated from responsibility on environmental grounds because of his harsh, underprivileged childhood,<sup>21</sup> whilst on another he is represented as the very incarnation of evil. The only possible conclusion is that it is the evil that is under attack, not the President, and that this evil is common to all men.

The clearest proof of this is in the first of two episodes which in effect form the basis of this study, namely

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21. See pp.297, 386, 454. Asturias' brief references to the President's past tally with Rafael Arévalo Martínez' biography of Estrada Cabrera, ¡Ecce Pericles! (Tipografía Nacional, Guatemala 1945). Arévalo Martínez is less sympathetic and tends to attribute Guatemala's problems to individual dictators and to the ignorant mass of Indians which forms 75 per cent of the national population.

the Baile de Tohil, seen by Cara de Angel near the end of the novel (chap.37). The episode is suggested by the Popol Vuh,<sup>22</sup> and represents the submission of the tribes to the god of fire. In Cara de Angel's vision the tribes willingly renounce their liberty and self-respect in exchange for merely remaining alive, in the hope that Tohil will satisfy their needs, and they agree to turn against their fellow men as he commands. Tohil then exclaims:

¡Estoy contento! Sobre hombres cazadores de  
hombres puedo asentar mi gobierno. No habrá  
ni verdadera vida ni verdadera muerte. (p.499)<sup>23</sup>

He orders them to dance, and dance they do, just as the citizens dance to the President's wishes.

The relation of this scene to the situation in the rest of the novel could hardly be clearer, and it is surprising that so little has been made of it. Its significance is the greater because it is at once Cara de Angel's great moment of awareness and also the warning that time is short for him. In the following chapter he says goodbye to Camila, leaves for Washington, and is arrested by Farfán on the way as recompense for his earlier good deed. The vision is Cara de Angel's brief moment of moral redemption (Jung's "individuation"), an awareness at last of what he has been and what his relation to society has been.

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22. Early editions of El Señor Presidente carried an epigraph from Asturias' translation of the Popol Vuh ("entonces se sacrificó a todas las tribus ante su rostro..."). Presumably he withdrew it from later editions because he regarded its message as too overt.
23. Again I quote from the most recent edition. The original version continued: "...ni verdadera honra ni verdadera deshonra, ni verdadera amistad ni enemistad verdadera." This omission would seem to be an improvement of the same kind as that mentioned in n.22 above.

Morally, the novel does not make for pleasant reading, as Octavio Corvalán has pointed out:

...esta novela es un acto de contrición americana. Nuestra novelística es como el espejo en el cuento de Blanca Nieves. Por mucho tiempo nos ha estado repitiendo la belleza, la soberbia de nuestra América, pero un día nos devuelve la verdadera imagen y nos espanta la brutal sinceridad con que nos enseña nuestra verdad. El Señor Presidente es esta última faz del espejo hispanoamericano. (24)

This view is supported by Augusto Monterroso's equally unequivocal remarks (though it should be emphasised again that the conclusions of these two critics are exceptions to the general consensus of critical opinion):

Cuando el señor Presidente aparece en El Señor Presidente, uno se da cuenta de que, de todos, él no es el peor..., de que es, ni más ni menos, el rey que las ranas pedían a gritos.... Es en esto, precisamente, en donde radica uno de los grandes valores de esta novela. Por supuesto, El Señor Presidente es una sátira dirigida contra tí y contra mí, que es contra quienes las buenas sátiras se han dirigido siempre. Es ingenuo pensar que está dirigida únicamente contra los dictadores. De te fabula narratur. Todo el mundo desea un auténtico dictador, un Julio César, un Napoleón, un padre que valga la pena. Pero a nosotros siempre tienen que salirnos estos pobres diablos hechos a imagen y semejanza nuestra. Las ranas piden rey y Júpiter sabe lo que les da. (25)

The vision of the Baile de Tohil is a powerful unifying influence in the novel. As the moment where Cara de Angel's trajectory reaches its highest point, and where the theme is finally unequivocally focused, it binds together the vision of the social system and the vision of individual perception by presenting the one consciously and definitively in terms of the other. Finally, by representing the almost mythical

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24. El postmodernismo (Las Américas, New York 1961), p.89.

25. From page 1 of the Introduction to a recording of Asturias reading selected extracts of El Señor Presidente, issued by the National Autonomous University of Mexico in 1967.

dictator in terms of a Maya legend, it seals the insistence on the power of imagination by suggesting the continuity of a kind of amorphous stream of legend. There are minor symbolic visions of a similar kind which point the way to this one, such as the author's own description of the crowds walking round the square and past the enormous open-air cinema screen on the day of a presidential fiesta:

El segundo día como el primero. La manta de vistas a manera de patíbulo y la vuelta al parque de los esclavos atados a la noria. (p.323)

To complement this picture of the enslaved citizens, there is Cara de Angel's symbolic dream about the system which controls the city, materialised in the persons of the Auditor and his soldiers:

Entre los hombres de pantalón rojo, el Auditor, con cara de lechuza, esgrimía un anónimo, lo besaba, lo lamía, se lo comía, lo defecaba, se lo volvía a comer... (p.406)

This makes it perfectly clear, if any doubt were left, that despite the concreteness which is the novel's most immediately striking feature, it is concerned not with particular people or the particular situation in which they find themselves, but rather with the abstract concept of man himself: the Auditor is here acting simultaneously as sycophant and executioner with one and the same person, just as Cara de Angel himself performs both functions in the action of the novel. These last two extracts foreshadow the culminating vision in which the President himself appears at the centre of the system in the bloody ritual of the Baile de Tohil, but they have already provided us with the means of interpreting it.

## The Problem of Truth

Thus it is that, explicitly or implicitly, minor themes and symbolic visions cluster together and flow into the major ones, thereby bringing them into sharper relief. The mounting structure of evil is further reinforced by innumerable tiny episodes which involve repugnant actions performed by individuals in isolation, or imposed on one individual by others. To emphasise the difference between these two aspects through their implications for the writer's alternating attitude, let us watch the reaction of El Mosco as he faces death at the hands of the Auditor. El Mosco refuses to bear false witness:

Un rictus de miedo y de asco tenía en la cara. (p.201. The italics are mine)

The opposition is significant for what it tells us of Asturias' varying point of view. If the novelist is attacking a moral evil, then the tone of his writing is frequently that of an unconcealed disgust, and this tone, which has distressed many critics, takes form in many incidents. The novel bulges with disgusting sights: men spit repeatedly (pp.230, 236, 240, 241, 246, 255, 267, 268, 390, 391), curse (pp.234-42, and chap.24), and pick their noses (p.261), whilst the dogs, in a city whose streets are littered with every kind of rubbish, urinate (p.337), vomit against church railings (p.233), and offer us the usual unsavoury manifestations of animals in love (p.337).

Such expressions of disgust, revealed in the more direct contraventions of decency at individual level, emanate, as in the case of El Mosco, from an essentially moral reaction. More concretely, there are, in addition to the unceasing progression of murders, torturings and other examples of bestiality that we are forced to witness at the front of the stage, a whole range of supporting actions, human and animal, of the same kind, which are only briefly

mentioned. The police poison dogs indiscriminately in the streets (p.200), drivers beat their horses for the pleasure of it (p.205), and doctors practice their surgery on unsuspecting Indians (p.221), whilst children torture insects (p.248) and gossips almost dance with glee at the idea that there is "una enferma grave en la vecindad" (p.436). In short, the human world is no better than the animal world, where vultures are ever ready to take some pleasure in the misfortunes of others (pp. 337, 390).

To a large extent the asco theme refers primarily to the real situation, and the miedo to the second plane, where the unreal takes root. The principal theme, which is decorated by this dual current of minor incidents, gives rise to two more accompanying themes, which provide us with two more points of view. These sub-themes are condensed in two further key words, farsa and lotería. There are various direct allusions to the subject of farce (Cara de Angel's wedding and Carvajal's trial are both so described), and there are many farcical episodes besides. The very word implies complete detachment on the part of the spectator. The President's regime deforms reality (more of this later) and reduces men to muñecos. The presentation of farce requires yet another switch of viewpoint by the author, with the adoption of an essentially satirical approach. Asturias has a keen sense of the grotesque on Spanish lines (Quevedo, Goya, Valle-Inclán), and it is put to good effect at these moments.

The suggestion that the key to life under this regime lies in the word lotería as a frase-síntesis is expounded on page 304. In contrast with the idea of farce, lotería suggests a view of extreme subjectivity held by someone who is in the dark, waiting for his fate to be resolved from above. It produces the hysterical terror which is shared by a succession of isolated characters all unaware of their "crime" and facing death alone. The contrast be-

tween the implications of these two sub-themes again demonstrates Asturias' facility in switching moods and points of view to maintain the impression of diversity which is so important a feature of the novel. To the President, the social situation is the result of a systematic political procedure, whilst to his suffering, uninformed subjects it takes the form of a lottery in which anything can happen; and to a detached, outside observer, concerned only with its surface manifestations, the whole situation takes on the grotesque outlines of an absurd farce.<sup>26</sup>

But how are we, the readers, to view it, assailed as we are by this unceasing flow of shifting points of view? The central theme is clear enough, but its detailed implications are less so. It is time to turn at last to the second central vision. It is the image of a little bird seen perhaps by Pelele, perhaps only by Asturias, as the idiot dreams of his mother in wish-fulfilment shortly after the opening of the novel:

¡Soy la Manzana-Rosa del Ave del Paraíso, soy la vida, la mitad de mi cuerpo es mentira y la mitad es verdad; soy rosa y soy manzana, doy a todos un ojo de vidrio y un ojo de verdad: los que ven con mi ojo de vidrio ven porque sueñan, los que ven con mi ojo de verdad ven porque miran! ¡Soy la vida, la Manzana-Rosa del Ave del Paraíso; soy la mentira de todas las cosas reales, la realidad de todas las ficciones! (p.210)

Asturias is telling us how to read his novel. The passage returns us to the initial opposition of the real and the unreal in the human psyche. It points indeed to the subjectivity of perception and the indifferentiation of the real and the unreal (for, given that the polarity exists, what are we to say is the border between its terms?) Asturias

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26. Comparison might be made here with Borges' La lotería de Babel.

uses the two concepts vaguely, as we all do, and in the development of the novel they continually overlap. But we must all of us take up a position in relation to the problems of existence. The alternating union and separation of the real and the unreal, which reproduces our own essentially paradoxical vision of phenomena, determines the whole movement of the novel. The problem it sets is the problem of truth. The quotation suggests both the coincidence and the contrasting of the two planes. It is therefore the key to the technical resolution of their conflicting realities and representational problems, by suggesting the apparent ambivalence of the narrative as a whole, and it is equally the key to the solution of the paradoxical problems raised by the plot and the central theme. In other words, it helps determine the reader's attitude to perception in the novel, pivoting on the real-unreal distinction, and to the theme, which is presented in terms of that perception, that is, on both a concrete and a supernatural plane. Let us now finally examine its ultimate implications for the ideas behind the theme, which materialise individually in the incidents which make up both the surface and the deeper form of the novel as a whole.

Under normal circumstances the diversity of life suggests an apparently infinite range of possibilities to the mind's eye of the individual (who is not himself concerned with heredity, environment and all the other factors which combine to plot his path through life). In this novel the range of possibility has been sharply tightened by the President's systematic erosion of civil liberties, which leaves recourse only to silent thought. To underline this, Asturias repeatedly raises possibilities which may or may not materialise. We have already mentioned the use of prayers in this respect. In chapter 17 ("Amor urdemales"), we see Camila waiting for Cara de Angel to arrive with news of her



father. General Canales may or may not be alive, and Cara de Angel may or may not come, and in either case the outcome is not in Camila's hands. Footsteps approach... and go past. Footsteps approach again... and this time Cara de Angel ceases to be what is to all intents and purposes a mere fictional personage invented by Camila's memory, or by her hope, and walks in the door, a reality in the novel at least. None of these details would be extraordinary or significant, were it not for the fact that each of them has a particular role to play both at the moment at hand and within the homogeneous conception of the novel as a whole. The emphasis here on hope and possibility persistently reminds us how tenuous is our psychic experience, how ephemeral and unstable are the constituents of our world; and it goes without saying that the theme of possibility is linked with the question of will and desire. Another typical and apparently paradoxical antithesis illustrates the way in which Asturias introduces the problems that interest him:

¡Ay, anhelo! Lo anhelado se tiene y no se tiene. (p.352)

Things we desire exist in our imagination, but not in reality. A whole line of philosophical inquiry lies within this short exclamation. Yearning is intensified in a situation where ordinary ranges of possibility are denied to characters who long for liberty, for those they have loved and lost, or, ultimately, for life itself. The horrors of the dictatorial regime, no matter how unreal, because abnormal, they seem, force the characters to face reality and, by extension, the human condition itself and their own moral standpoint in relation to it. Some characters manage briefly to overcome the temporal and spatial world of reality by escaping into the unreal world of their own imagination. An example is Fedina Rodas in prison:

Reanimada, hizo esfuerzos para pensarse libre y lo consiguió. Vióse en su casa, entre sus cosas y sus conocidos... (pp.314-15)

The symbolic relation of the prison cell to our material being is by no means a new idea. Cara de Angel finds himself in the same predicament as Fedina and reacts in a similar fashion:

Y sentía a Camila junto a su cuerpo, en la pólvora sedosa del tacto, en su respiración, en sus oídos, entre sus dedos, contra las costillas que sacudían como pestañas los ojos de las vísceras ciegas...

Y la poseía... (p.524)

Generally speaking, however, the reverse situation is the case. Cara de Angel tries to escape into some kind of vacuum of unconsciousness when he realises he has lost all hope of Camila's love (my italics):

Venía a olvidar, a dormir, a no ser. (p.352)

But it is impossible to escape for long from what Asturias elsewhere calls "las fauces abiertas de los hechos" (p.358), which can generally be identified with the wider but no less restricting prison formed by time and space. Carvajal's wife experiences the desperation of being in one place and therefore unable to be in another:

Necesitaba salvar a su marido. Pero no llegaban... Llegar, llegar, llegar, pero no llegaban... Llegar, pedir y salvarlo, pero no llegaban... Estaban fijos como los alambres del telégrafo, más bien iban atrás como los alambres del telégrafo.... (p.444)

And Cara de Angel wishes he could defeat time by returning to the comfortable days before he had ever met Camila Canales. It is impossible, however:

Necesitaba dormir o, por lo menos, que el cuarto fingiera ignorar el día, ese día, constataba con rencor, que no podía ser otro más que ese mismo día. (p.351)

In both these cases the protagonists are wishing that reality were other than it is because of its implications

for someone dear to them. The novel is constructed wholly from this individual point of view, as we have noted. Having apparently lost Camila for ever, Cara de Angel cannot see any significance in life simply because his own life has lost its meaning:

¿Por qué sigue la vida diaria?... ¿Por qué anda el tranvía?... ¿Por qué no se mueren todos? (pp.401-402)

But Camila survives:

Un milagro, la continuación arbitraria de lo perecedero, el triunfo sobre el absoluto estéril de la migaja humana. (p.438)

Even so, there comes a day for all of us, when the fragile balance is tilted and time and space conspire fatally and irremediably against us, the moment when we face our death; and this is the moment that the conscious mind will not accept, especially when death looms suddenly, unexpectedly, or unjustly. It is of course what the Spaniard calls the "moment of truth". The coincidence of a point in time and space is what in English we call "the here and now", and it is precisely this terrible actuality which Asturias manages to render, and which the characters in the novel are unable to accept.

Cara de Angel is unable to accept the harsh reality of his capture. Carvajal simply cannot believe that his farcical trial is really happening to him; and after he is sentenced his wife cannot get it into her head that a man can be deliberately killed by other men who are just like him. How can we live, be so concrete, our lives so actual--so real, in short--and then cease to be? She waits outside the prison:

Después de todo, ya estando allí, se le hacía imposible que fusilaran a su marido, así como así; así, de una descarga, con balas, con armas, hombres como él, gente como él, con ojos, con boca, con manos, con pelo en la cabeza, con uñas en los dedos, con dientes en la boca, con lengua, con galillo... No era posible que lo fusilaran

hombres así, gente con el mismo color de piel, con el mismo acento de voz, con la misma manera de ver, de oír, de acostarse, de levantarse, de amar, de lavarse la cara, de comer, de reír, de andar, con las mismas creencias y las mismas dudas... (pp.448-49)

But they do shoot Carvajal. This passage is highly revealing. It shows again Asturias' systematic use of language, to compare and contrast one man in particular with men in general. The use of clusters of paratactic clauses constructs a detailed comparison of Carvajal with his imagined executioners, and expresses perfectly the woman's stunned inability to accept that her husband is going to die. Further, given that Carvajal is going to die, it carries with it the implicit question which asks: what is life for, anyway, if death can be so senseless? Señora Carvajal is not aware of this any more than any of the other characters are, but it is concealed in what she says. Most interesting of all, her thoughts move along the same trajectory as our own analysis, for as she runs over what is common to all men her mind moves from a consideration of our common modes of perception ("ver", "oír"), through aspects of action or behaviour ("acostarse", "levantarse", "lavarse la cara"), to the question of belief ("mismas creencias", "mismas dudas"), which we are shortly to discuss. We see once again that the broad conception of Asturias' most characteristic novels can in each case be detected in microcosmic form in the minutest of structural elements.

The problem of truth is complicated by the question of the individual attitude to it, which in turn depends upon the essentially subjective nature of our psychic processes. We have just seen how Señora Carvajal had to try to spell out her husband's position to herself in an attempt to convince herself that he could not possibly be executed (though what she was really doing, of course, was undergoing the opposite process, the bitter road to acceptance of the fact of his imminent death: the next time we see her this process

is complete). Asturias has discussed this problem early in the novel with reference to a previous moment in the narrative, and he expresses it largely in the character's own words:

El alma no comprende la felicidad ni la desgracia sin delectarlas antes. Hay que morder y morder el pañuelo salóbrego de llanto, rasgarlo, hacerle dientes con los dientes. Para Camila todo aquello era un juego o una pesadilla; verdad no, verdad no podía ser; algo que estuviera pasando, pasándole a ella, pasándole a su papá, no podía ser. (p.269)

Again:

Lo que nos parece mentira siendo verdad, nos hace llorar de júbilo o de pena... (p.357)

It is in such examples that one sees most clearly the advantages of indirect discourse and other techniques tending to identify the reader with the situation of the suffering characters. The individuality of each character is rendered irrelevant by Asturias' intensely vivid forays into their very essence, the sharp immediacy of which forces the reader to undergo the horrors they endure, rather than observe and assess them at leisure. And as the novel itself repeatedly demonstrates, it is sensorial perception which comes first and which makes the most dynamic impact upon the human psyche: conceptualisation comes after. By attacking the reader's senses with every possible technical weapon Asturias achieves maximum impact, and impresses upon him the terrors of the dictatorship and of oppression of all kinds as a reality which has been experienced. This point has been clearly perceived by Carlos Navarro:

Rather than embalming the novel with transitory fact, Asturias keeps it alive by preserving in art the transcendental destructive process that vitalized those facts. Thus, as a living horror, it can mirror, expose and combat all Latin American dictatorships and, in a broad

der sweep, any kind of oppression...<sup>27</sup>

We cannot read it. We can only feel it. It does not address us rationally, but attacks our senses with the same irritants that invade the characters.

It alienates us from the other characters, because it destroys them too quickly for us to get to know them, or encases them in an impenetrable clown suit. We do not shudder because they are being exterminated, but because the same thing could happen to us. (28)

These extracts illustrate both the strengths and the weaknesses of Navarro's thesis. It is by far the best of the studies to have appeared on the subject of this novel, but because he insists on one aspect alone--the process of literary destruction--as the secret to the understanding of it, he has over-simplified what is in fact a bewilderingly complex work. Though it is manifestly true that sensation is more important in this novel than in other works of fiction, we cannot accept that it does not address us rationally. Its very essence is the alternation between the two divergent methods of representation. We are not alienated from the victims. They are certainly destroyed, but Asturias' device of relating their thoughts and feelings both to the moment in question and to the roots of human being and the wider context of the novel, at one and the same time, only heightens our reaction of shock and pity. And besides, the image of the human psyche itself is unmistakably present, rising in ever firmer lines behind the novel's ever-changing screen. What is astonishing is that a novel with so little overt comment or discussion should be so very complex. We must now go on to show more clearly why this is so, and why Navarro's destruction thesis is incomplete.

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27. Navarro, "The Destruction of Reality in El Señor Presidente", p.160.

28. Ibid, pp.162-63.

It is true that on the surface Asturias is apparently concerned only with the fact of death, rather than the point of it, but this, as has been suggested, is merely to provoke a deeper reaction. The function of death in the novel is not merely that of showing the barbarity of man to man, but also that of bringing consciousnesses face to face with the moment of truth, when finally they have to confront the implications of life and of their part in it. The underlying conclusion is clearly that life should have been faced long before. The existential question of one's standpoint in relation to life and death is seen to be the other face of the problem of one's moral relation to one's fellows. At the end of the novel a group of political prisoners is marched past us in chains, and the author comments on behalf of the bystanders:

Ser ellos y no ser los que a su paso se ale-  
graban en el fondo de no ser ellos... (p.530)

This indifference to the problems of others, this inability really to put oneself in their place, is almost as criminal, Asturias seems to be saying, as the more direct malevolence which characterises so many of the men and women in the novel. We must fight to overcome the darkness, just as the daylight does. Being glad that one is not someone else is the inverse of wishing that one were--"ser y no ser"--and this leads on to the problem of identity, for Asturias implicitly covers all the main philosophical problems. What kind of person am I, and what kind of person am I to become? The same moments of crisis that make some characters retreat helplessly into fantasy force others, in different situations, to consider, perhaps for the first time, who and what they are.

The problem is focused most clearly in the case of General Canales, who has lived only a public role, without really examining his own private conscience:

¿Cuál era la realidad? No haber pensado nunca con su cabeza, haber pensado siempre con el quepis. (p.410) n.29

Earlier, the great General Canales, faced by the spectre of death at the hands of the President, had been reduced to a very humble figure:

El General Eusebio Canales, alias Chamarrita, abandonó la casa de Cara de Angel con porte marcial, como si fuera a ponerse al frente de un ejército, pero al cerrar la puerta y quedar solo en la calle, su paso de parada militar se licuó en carrerita de indio que va al mercado a vender una gallina. (p.255)

The idea is expanded over the following pages. Asturias indicates that the problem of conscience, like the problem of death, is essentially an individual one, and that the responsibility for the group situation must be attributed to a multiplicity of guilty individuals. A point is reached in the life of each of the characters where they are left completely alone to face their fate, before death claims them.

Under a regime like the one portrayed here it is very difficult to maintain a normal sense of proportion and to know what to believe, and the sad truth that not everyone is able to shed their mask of self-deception as Canales does is shown by a blasphemous picture of the Fiesta Nacional:

¡Señor, Señor, llenos están los cielos de vuestra gloria! Las señoras sentían el divino poder del Dios amado. Sacerdotes de mucha enjundia le incensaban. Los juristas se veían en un torneo de Alfonso el Sabio. Los diplomáticos, excelencias de Tiflis, se daban grandes tonos consintiéndose en Versalles, en la corte del Rey Sol. Los periódistas nacionales y extranjeros se relamían en presencia del redivivo Pericles. (p.296)

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29. The problem expressed so neatly here is Jung's concept of the persona: "Identification with one's title is very attractive indeed, which is precisely why so many men are nothing more than the decorum accorded them by society." (Jacobi, op.cit., p.28)



Such satire would be a cheap device did it not correspond to the depressing reality of political life in so many Latin American republics up to the present day. The citizens have allowed the President to make himself the arbiter of all things, and the fount of truth, as Cara de Angel acknowledges in his revised version of Descartes' principle:

...pienso con la cabeza del Señor Presidente  
luego existo, pienso con la cabeza del Señor  
Presidente luego existo... (p.501)

The first instance of the regime's inversion of the truth is when the Auditor forces the beggars to swear that Canales and Carvajal are responsible for the murder of Parrales Sonriente, and the whole plot of the novel depends on this inversion. It is significant that the President holds to this lie even in the presence of Cara de Angel (p.226), who knows the truth of the matter perfectly well; and of course Cara de Angel himself collaborates in the great collective lie by constantly flattering the President with oily praise that he knows equally well to be false.

Like the posters proclaiming the necessity for the President's re-election (p.491), which assume that truth can be imposed by hyperbole and the number of exclamation marks employed, Lengua de Vaca's laudatory speech in honour of the President on the day of the Fiesta Nacional is an object lesson in inversion. It is the anniversary of the President's miraculous escape from a bomb attempt against his life:

-¡Hijo de-el pueblo! - repitió la del discurso -, del pueblo digo: el sol en este día de radiante hermosura, el cielo viste, cuida su luz tus ojos y tu vida, enseña del trabajo sacrosanto que sucede en la bóveda celeste a la luz la sombra, la sombra de la noche negra y sin perdón de donde salieron las manos criminales que en lugar de sembrar los campos, como tú, Señor, lo enseñas, sembraron a su paso una bomba que a pesar de sus científicas precauciones europeas, te dejó ileso...  
(p.297)

It is significant that this speech tends, as does the whole policy of the regime, to invert values that are universally accepted. By equating the President with light and those who oppose him with darkness, Lengua de Vaca inverts the normal scale of values and the symbolism which Asturias himself employs throughout the novel, achieving the addition of yet another dimension to the complex of theory and practice in this work.

It is the distortion of truth by the President and his adherents which, transposed onto a technical level, sets up the series of inversions and paradoxes which fill the novel. Initially, then, this distortion is effected through language. The President reduces his scribe to "ese animal", Doctor Barreño to a "mediquete", and all the citizens of the country to "gente de voy", simply by uttering the words. And the deformation is continued by the author's own method, in which people are presented as everything but human. All the beggars are deformed in some way, especially Pelele, and they move like worms (p.194). Don Benjamín, the tiritero, is a mouse (p.244), or alternately a mandarin orange in relation to his wife's grapefruit proportions (p.246). The Auditor's servant looks like an umbrella (pp.339-40); a postman has an enormous head and tiny body; Barreño has a "cara de bistec seco" (p.217), someone else a "cara de tomate" (p.296), and the Auditor's secretary has a "cara de secante blanco" (p.317), whilst Carvajal's trial leaves his face as "pálido cemento" (p.433).

The key word in this case is muñeco (see pp.393, 432, 442). Don Benjamín, the tiritero, and his wife Dona Venjamón, are themselves puppet figures, as their matching names suggest, and their dialogues bear this out. In general, apart from the importance of sensation and therefore, for example, the use of onomatopoeia to reproduce sounds, the exact copying of certain exaggerated speech patterns--where what is said is less important than how--stylises

much of the text and caricatures the characters involved. Asturias imitates such diverse speakers as an Italian (p. 435), an Indian (408-411), a North American (488-90), a terrified, stuttering woman (443), a drunk (393), and a parrot (458), as well as copying exactly the syntax and vocabulary of the various social classes in Guatemala.

Any kind of extreme patterning of language (Mr. Micawber is probably the best known example) causes a kind of deformation of personality, and turns the people concerned into puppets, since the dialogue depends mainly on the linguistic relations of one speech to another, rather than on the thoughts which they express. The characters in the novel are puppets because, as the Tohil vision clearly shows, they dance to the will of one man alone, rather than obeying their own consciences. The puppet symbol normally implies a deterministic fictional conception, and indicates here that the President has assumed the role of fate as far as the citizens are concerned, and has robbed them of their freewill.

The result of this distortion of truth is the whole series of inversions and paradoxes which occur throughout the novel, deriving initially from the paradoxes Asturias detects in life itself, and in the human condition. Thus it is that Cara de Angel is "bello y malo", or that Pelele can dream of the mother he longs for, and of being given a rainbow to suck, from his bed on the rubbish tip. Doña Chón's brothel is full of religious images, and Cara de Angel is moved almost to tears by the strains of Clair de Lune, which he hears tinkling out from another brothel as he drags the drunken Farfán back to his barracks. At the end of the novel Cara de Angel breathes in the memory of his wife like a poem from the depths of a filthy, stinking dungeon; and El Mosco, blind and legless, a veritable half a man, and probably the ugliest character in the novel (i.e., the very opposite of Cara de Angel), is the only one to perform an entirely selfless action.

What all these paradoxes are doing is to force the reader to ask himself questions which, though apparently of a literary-aesthetic nature, depend for their solution on an understanding of the underlying themes of the novel as a whole: such is the closeness of the relation of detail or incident to overall structure. The paradoxes invariably turn upon the real-unreal antithesis, which is systematically related to the complementary conscious-unconscious division in the human psyche. The whirling fragments of reality allow of a whole host of possibilities for man to make something of his life. The functioning of the human mind is reproduced through language, and it is through language that Asturias produces the effects of distortion, inversion and paradox that so strike the reader of this novel:

El gato...de cuando en cuando movía las orejas, como para espantarse los ruidos. (p.259)

The visual comparison here is almost certainly with those animals such as cows and horses that have tails to deter flies and midges from irritating them. The very reverse is in fact true here, since the cat moves his ears not to frighten noises away, but because the noises have already disturbed him. There are many similar examples:

El cielo se veía muy lejos, muy azul, adornado como una tumba altísima por coronas de zopilotes que volaban en círculos dormidos. (pp.211-212)

It is strange to consider that vultures could ever be thought to adorn anything, and to that extent this is quite a shocking antithesis. It is based on the simple fact that vultures, which are ugly in form and function on the ground, are extremely graceful when airborne. Equally, dogs urinating against walls are said to be recreating Niagara Falls (p.337), and the moon is seen being carried along the street by the filthy water in the gutters (p.249). The world is an apparently undifferentiated realm of possibilities, and man lives on both a material and a spiritual plane:

...el tantaneo de las campanas, que daban los buenos días a Nuestro Señor, alternaba con los golpes fofos de las carnicerías donde hacaban la carne. (p.337)

El Señor Presidente is a monument to the achievement of language in the novel. In a book whose emphasis seems almost wholly on the ugly and repugnant aspects of human existence, perhaps the greatest paradox is that the final impression should not be one of sordidness, and it is this aspect that has escaped Carlos Navarro and other less perspicacious critics. Gabriel Venaissin's review of the novel is full of suggestive insights:

Je doute donc qu'un roman ait jamais créé une plus totale asphyxie et se soit employé davantage à peindre une réalité plus semblable à un chancre... Mais la vérité du livre n'est pas là. Son miracle, c'est de partir de cet univers pour aller vers autre chose... il n'est pas un moment du livre où nous ne nous sentions projetés vers le ciel et les étoiles, conduits dans l'espace, poussés vers la liberté... Il invente un langage de liberté totale à partir d'un réel où la liberté meurt totalement à chaque instant.<sup>30</sup>

Language itself, in short, provides the equilibrium which the plot alone would otherwise leave lacking. In the midst of evil, destruction and social disintegration, metaphor rebuilds the world through a new series of relationships. If Carlos Navarro's thesis of destruction were correct, Asturias would have created a thoroughly concrete world, but this is by no means the case. He does not wish to show a hopelessly ugly world, for he is too much a believer in the power of the human spirit for good or evil, and therefore provides through language what is lacking in the moral behaviour of his characters. He is able to use imagery in a systematic and functional way because, as he sees very

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30. "Monsieur le Président", Esprit, 21ème année, no.7 (Paris, July 1953), pp.155-8.

clearly, links in the physical world and in the human imagination are of quite different kinds:

Amanecía en la escuela nocturna de las ranas que enseñaban a leer a las estrellas. (p.407)

A concept here links two sets of things which have no connection other than that they both manifest themselves at night. This kind of device would be entirely facile (as it often was, for example, in the case of Modernist writers), were it not disciplined by the demands of unity and by its function of mitigating the depressing effect of the subject matter. It weaves a series of counterpointed themes which hint at another, quite different world.

#### The Dimensions of the Novel

The attempt to present a truly comprehensive study of Asturias' achievement in El Señor Presidente has involved dissecting and classifying its intangible components more in the way one deals with poetry than in the manner usually employed with narrative. As with any structure, one must first examine the inter-relation of the parts if the organic whole is to be understood, and so it is here. Yet more than almost any other novel, El Señor Presidente demands that the critic should look at it as a homogeneous literary edifice, just as the ordinary reader does. It must again be stressed, now that we are about to put it all together again, that the plot would be of scarce interest were it not for its carefully worked, organic relation to the wider thematic network within an integral vision of the hecho central. At any given moment the reader is aware not only of what the character concerned is thinking or feeling, but also that that person is representative of humanity as a whole (outside the novel), and that his actions, mental or physical, are expressed in terms of themes which relate to a stratified pattern inside the no-

vel. Art and life seem almost to unite. It is for this reason--that the themes lie within the language, rather than being openly expressed by it--that this study largely ignores the word "style", and concentrates on technique.

The last stage of the study relates, then, to the function of the plot, which is not only that of advancing the narrative, at all its levels, towards the required conclusion, but to pattern it as this development goes on. We therefore return briefly to the fundamental alternation from which all the others take their form and meaning, namely the opposition between the real and unreal planes. In this conception we are confronted on the one hand with a stylised but basically real socio-political drama in which a real city is in the grip of a sordid dictatorial regime whose aims and methods are clearly expounded, whilst on the other we see superimposed upon it a vision of the same city as an infernal realm peopled by essences, abstracts of thoughts and emotions which swirl in an amorphous current throughout the novel:

...los pordioseros arrebatában del aire la  
car-car-car-car-cajada, del aire, del aire...  
la car-car-car-car-cajada.... (p.192)

Here there seems to be suggested a mysterious correspondence between men and the wind, as if the substance of human expression were something eternal in the air, as if the beggars were part of some universal chorus. It is the Dostoyevskyan technique of giving his characters a double dimension. Asturias is materialising the cosmic forces which have been buried in man's unconscious since life began. The concrete, real plane is overlaid by a second reality, in which the background atmosphere, full of mysterious and terrifying presences, brought to life in an unceasing flow of images, invades the borderline between the real and the unreal.

This, then, is the inward framework, which grows from the horizontal structure of the novel. The story itself traces an arbitrary chain of events resulting from the chance murder of an army officer by a half-crazed beggar. The dictator decides to use the murder to rid himself of two public figures, a general and a lawyer. Two plot strands emerge. In the one a series of helpless people are enmeshed in the web of incrimination and are murdered one by one. The other is the story of Cara de Angel, the President's favourite and the main character. He is detailed to help the general to escape, so that he can be shot down under the Ley fuga. The favourite unfortunately falls in love with the general's young daughter and marries her, which leads to his eventual elimination. Here the novel ends.

The plot structure is such that Cara de Angel begins as a verdugo and continues as such until all the victims have been eliminated, which is the moment chosen by Asturias to begin the favourite's own downfall. This aspect is of fundamental artistic importance. The novel is in three parts:

- 1) "21, 22, y 23 de abril".
- 2) "24, 25, 26 y 27 de abril".
- 3) "Semanas, meses, años".

Various critics have drawn attention to the sense of time within this work.<sup>31</sup> Parts I and II, especially the former, move very quickly and evoke the high drama of each terrible symptom of the dictatorship, whilst Part III, significantly dateless, drags out the desperate monotony of life in a society without liberty.

Of the three parts only the first shows any really cohesive internal structure, which is logical enough, since

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31. The best of these studies is Ricardo Navas Ruiz, "Tiempo y palabra en Miguel Angel Asturias", Quaderni Ibero-Americani, no.29 (Turin, Dec 1963), pp.276-82.



Asturias' technique is in a sense a circular one: he moves from an ordered initial structure concentrated within a small radius through a dilution and extension of his basic themes to the ordered conception of the whole. The narrative of Part I advances in pairs of chapters, linked either by contrast and comparison or by cause and effect. It is worth noting that these are precisely the two sets of principles which at bottom form the two different bases of the structural conceptions under examination in this study.

Chapter 1 shows the killing of Parrales Sonriente by Pelele, whilst chapter 2 shows its immediate result: the false incrimination of Canales and Carvajal, and the torture of the beggars, one of whom, El Mosco, is murdered. The Auditor's monstrous cruelty on behalf of the state parallels the more general atmosphere of evil suggested by the first chapter, as a particular example of bestiality flowing from the exposition of universal podredumbre.

In chapter 3, Pelele flees from the city centre and falls asleep on a rubbish tip, whilst in chapter 4 he is discovered there by a woodcutter and by Cara de Angel, introduced for the first time.

In chapter 5 we see the President for the first time as he berates a doctor for his honesty and has one of his servants beaten to death over a trifle. In chapter 6 Cara de Angel arrives at the presidential office and is briefed on the plot to trap Canales. Cara de Angel moves off on the assignment and meets Lucio Vásquez, a policeman of the secret force, in the "Bar Tus-Tep", outside Canales' house (Vásquez' role as a link figure may be noted here).

Chapter 7 brings Genaro Rodas into the picture as the horrified witness of his friend Vásquez' murder of Pelele. Chapter 8 deals with the immediate effects of the murder

on the streets around the square, centring on Don Benjamín the puppeteer.

In chapter 9 Rodas is pursued by the hallucinatory eye suggested to his terrified imagination by the murder of Pelele. He takes it to be the eye of the Devil. In chapter 10 General Canales, after a meeting in which Carra de Angel supposedly tips him off as to the President's intentions, creeps home through the deserted streets in terror of detection, little knowing that the eye of one of the President's spies is following his every move. The parallel between the supposed eye of the Devil and the eye of the President's spy system needs no elaboration, and is an echo at plot level of the contrast which we have mentioned between the almost supernatural evil established in chapter 1, and the concrete actions of the Auditor in chapter 2. These are moments where the underlying opposition of the two planes takes on a surface form. Genaro's fear is of death and the Devil, while Canales fears the state and the President. In either case, these parallelisms of the real and the unreal are introduced almost imperceptibly, but they form part of a systematic pattern, as we have seen. A further aid to symmetry is that both men are comforted by females when they arrive home, that is, by Fedina and Camila, who are themselves linked by the servant-mistress relationship.

Chapters 11 and 12 do in fact continue the process of organisation by pairs. They are separated by the division between Parts I and II because (1) chapter 11 contains a climax suitable for ending Part I; (2) the plot is about to take a new direction; (3) the development by pairs is in fact about to cease, as the hitherto tightly woven strands of the plot begin to go their different, though in each case abortive, ways.

Chapter 11 ("El rapto") is concerned with Canales' escape, but the title gives the clue to its main concern: the

abduction of Camila. Thus the climax of Part I points the way into Part II, which opens with an interlude showing a series of flashbacks into Camila's past. Menton criticises Asturias' use of the technique here, and finds the only explanation of the anomaly in Asturias' attempt to suggest a reason for Camila's subsequent rejection by her family.<sup>32</sup> However, the reason for the rejection is made perfectly clear--her aunts and uncles are too afraid to take her in--, and Navas Ruiz offers a much more convincing explanation.<sup>33</sup> The purpose of the flashback is partly to show Camila's sensual nature, and partly, by the violence of the transition, to indicate how abrupt is the change for her from past security to present unhappiness. Thus chapter 12 is itself split in two. The first section is the flashback into Camila's past, and the second is her arrival at the "Tus-Tep", escorted by Cara de Angel and Vásquez.

From here onwards there is no clear pattern as far as chapter content is concerned, but a new arrangement is about to emerge. In general, the second part shows the sufferings of Niña Fedina and the emotional crisis undergone by Cara de Angel, brought on by his blossoming love for the apparently dying Camila. The brothel owned by Doña Chón provides the link setting. Finally, Canales' escape over the border (in chapter 27, "Camino al destierro") stretches the vision of injustice all over the country and projects the time notation well into a vague future, in contrast with the episode of his flight at the end of Part I, which required an immediate continuation.

Part III opens with the "Habla en la sombra" (ch.28) between the student, the sacristan and Lic. Abel Carvajal.

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32. Historia crítica de la novela guatemalteca, p.211.

33. Navas Ruiz, op.cit.

Their voices in the darkness asking one another what day it is confirm the impression of impending vagueness established by the Canales episode of the previous chapter, and begin to give the title of this third part ("Semanas, meses, años") concrete expression.

Part II witnessed the elimination of Fedina, the last of the minor victims caught up in the original murder. Her baby was allowed to die, and Fedina retreated into insanity. In Part III we watch the deaths of Lic. Carvajal and General Canales, the two figures originally implicated by the President in the interests of political expedience. The logic of the plot is in striking conformity with the thematic logic. Just as the real and the unreal are contrasted and merged on parallel planes, so the real killer, Pelele, and the alleged but innocent assassins, Canales and Carvajal, are all three brought to death. Thus where Parts I and II showed the deaths of a series of minor characters (El Mosco, Ese Animal, Pelele, La Chabelona, Fedina's baby), Part III brings us to the conclusion of the initial plot line with the execution of Carvajal following a sham trial, and the death of Canales, apparently from a heart attack triggered by false news about Camila.

The second plot line involves Cara de Angel, the character who binds the action together, and in whom its elements find conscious focus. We have shown that at the very beginning of the novel there is a clear indication that he is somehow different in quality from the other characters. This is simply because he is the character who operates most clearly on the two planes, thereby uniting them behind him as he glides through the novel. We have already examined his character development and must now examine his movement at the level of the plot, for it is this that finally determines the pattern of the novel.

At the beginning of Part III Cara de Angel's trajectory has continued against an unchanging background of mur-

der and injustice. Although small hints are dropped at intervals beforehand, events really begin to crowd in upon him from chapter 32, called, significantly, "El Señor Presidente". In this chapter there are various symbols which clearly anticipate Cara de Angel's fate: (1) the President's mention of the fly game; (2) the President vomits over Cara de Angel, a suggestion that his idyllic new life with Camila is soon to be soiled; (3) the President reveals that he has had the newspapers print an announcement that he was padrino de boda at Cara de Angel's wedding, thereby bringing Camila into his circle of influence:

El único ser que le era querido bailaba ya  
en la farsa en que bailaban todos. (p.455)

In chapter 33 Rodas is charged to tail the favourite. Chapter 34 shows Cara de Angel's idyll with Camila. In chapter 35 they are again dragged back into the President's world by an invitation to his country residence, and the episode of the marimba provides another foreboding of death. In chapter 36 Canales dies and with him the revolution and all hope of change. And finally, in chapter 37 Cara de Angel's vision of the Baile de Tohil provides the central theme of the novel and Cara de Angel's own moment of moral redemption. If he is still not fully conscious of his insight and does not act upon its implications, at least the novel has recognised it through him, as a triumph of consciousness, that is to say, for the human psyche that has been outlined throughout the novel.

At this point, then, when Canales, the last of the President's victims, has met his death, Cara de Angel's wavering trajectory begins to take a definitive downward course towards death. He tries to use a diplomatic appointment to escape from the President's clutches, but is arrested and thrown into prison under appalling conditions. Instead of sailing for New York in cabin 17 he ends up in cell 17 in a prison somewhere in Guatemala. Finally, his

will to live is broken when a fellow prisoner planted by the President informs him that Camila is the dictator's mistress.

It cannot be a coincidence that Cara de Angel's downfall should begin at precisely the point when all the other characters have been eliminated, and indeed this pattern has a double force. Firstly, it maintains the emphasis upon cruelty and suffering which has marked the whole narrative; and secondly, it seals its insistence upon these unpleasant facts of human life by demonstrating that the principal character must also undergo the same trials and meet the same end as all the others. When there is no other victim remaining the internal equilibrium of the novel demands that it be the turn of Cara de Angel himself. The vision of suffering is maintained through a succession of consciousnesses on a sort of sliding scale. The minor figures are represented always as victims, whilst the President, the Auditor, etc., remain always as oppressors in an unchanging hierarchy. But Cara de Angel appears as both predator and preyed-upon, a symbol of mankind as a whole.<sup>34</sup> Within the space-time continuum of this novel there exists a thematic continuum formed by the cruelty of man to man. The movement through one character to another relieves any possibility of monotony, whilst insisting on the unchanging nature of the events treated. This is one of the functions of plot in patterning a novel of this kind. There may be a flashing panorama of different sufferers, but always someone is suffering.

The way Cara de Angel's movement fits into the overall design, and the dove-tailing of the Tohil vision into its particular position in relation to him and to the other elements confirms our view of the novel as a poetic work in which plot and characters become simply motifs in the com-

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34. One thinks of Larra's article on "La sociedad": "Esa es la sociedad; una reunión de víctimas y de verdugos. ¡Dichoso aquél que no es verdugo y víctima a un tiempo!"

pleted pattern. We are again impressed with the importance of diversity, since only with a very great number of elements at his disposal could Asturias have produced the pattern, and hence the implicit conclusions, that he sought.

Criticism of this novel, as of Asturias' work in general, has revealed certain inadequacies of critical perspective in Latin American~~x~~ and elsewhere. El Señor Presidente cannot be approached as the political novel has traditionally been approached, but only a few individual critics have attempted to find alternatives. The most incisive study to date is without question that of Carlos Navarro. Even so, Navarro's belief that the novel is essentially a brilliant essay in literary destruction gives the impression, when all is said and done, that Asturias' only fundamental technique is repetition. Navarro divides the whole novel into rigid classifications and, despite a complex system of cross-references, leaves us with an erroneously static vision which ignores the essential dynamism pulsing through Asturias' network of themes and techniques.

Navarro's failure is that although he clearly recognises the multi-functional nature of Asturias' "style", he fails to conceive it in adequate terms and therefore fails to master it. One of the reasons for this, again, is that his emphasis on destruction presupposes (1) the total eradication of the ordinary world: this leads to his wholly ignoring the function of plot, which, though greatly modified, is still fundamental; (2) an insistence that the novel moves increasingly towards darkness. This is not so: the novel ends in darkness, certainly, but it also began in darkness. Its essence is a struggle between darkness and light. If we were to admit that Cara de Angel's trajectory ends in darkness, and that he is the principal character, this would only go to prove the importance of plot and character in this novel.

This work is not as simple as Navarro would have us believe. His critical procedure in moving from Asturias' depiction of the destruction of the external, physical world inwards to the mental world, is essentially sound, but he does not deduce all that he might from this. It is not satisfactory to say that the novel could stop anywhere, as our analysis of *Cara de Angel*'s trajectory has tried to show. This is indeed the impression that Asturias gives, but the real question is how he achieves such an illusion, and Navarro fails to dredge any ideas on this subject from the nature of the characters' actions and responses in the novel. Even though there is little true interaction among characters there is a great deal of interaction among the thematic currents, and this is not confined to a series of easily classifiable elements which can be listed in logical order as a taxonomist might do. Just as Navarro perceives no relation between the characters other than their fear and isolation, so each step of his analysis is isolated from the rest.

He perspicaciously indicates that the triumph of the novel is its universal application as a condemnation of tyranny, but fails to realise that this is only half the story: the novel also shows the universality of human thought in the modern world, culminating in the twentieth-century existential crisis. This too is rendered rather than reported, but is not the less present for that. The novel is not only modern in form. How could it be? All these omissions derive ultimately from Navarro's interesting but over-simplified premise, which claims undue importance for fears and acts of destruction whilst ignoring a still more fundamental theme: evil.

A novel like El Señor Presidente, or novels such as Ulysses or Finnegan's Wake, cannot be dealt with in purely traditional fashion, as Navarro clearly perceives.



The problem is to achieve a critical study which as far as possible emulates, or at least suggests, the homogeneity of Asturias' own literary creation. Joyce's works have consistently denied attempts by critics to come alongside, though this surely does not mean that the efforts have been wasted. It may be felt that the attempt to board El Señor Presidente is a far less ambitious enterprise, since although Asturias has clearly learned many important lessons from Joyce and his followers, he has nevertheless applied them with a certain circumspection which is not at first evident. He uses the interior monologue and stream-of-consciousness devices sparingly and to telling effect.

Asturias' novels generally obey a stricter conception than do many novels by writers also concerned with patterns of language and patterns of existence. Joyce's purpose in Ulysses, for example, though certainly not imprecise, is unmistakably anarchic, and he builds his novel into a showering spiral of impressions around the consciousnesses of two men on one day. Asturias builds his two great novels, El Señor Presidente and Hombres de maíz, around a collective situation, thereby returning constantly to the nuclei at the centre of his work, and though his use of language is anarchic in appearance, it is, in the best Hispanic tradition, much more closely patterned and precise, limited to a circle of suggestiveness which, however wide in appearance, is very tightly controlled in fact. El Señor Presidente is, indeed, a triumph of poetic organisation.

Hombres de maíz is the most neglected of Miguel Angel Asturias' novels. It is also his own favourite.<sup>1</sup> Twenty years after publication it is still more or less a mystery even to those who admire it, and no comprehensive interpretation has yet appeared. The majority of those critics who have examined it fail to offer any useful approach to its method or meaning. The author himself rarely refers to his own books in other than general terms, as we have seen, and has never furnished an explanation of this particular novel in all the time elapsed since its publication in 1949. Apparently he is impervious to criticisms of his work, for he has made little attempt to defend Hombres de maíz in the face of incomprehension and condemnation.

Incomprehension was and is inevitable. The novel is highly specific in its choice of subject matter, dealing as it does with a fast disappearing culture in a country little enough known in any case. Asturias considers it the "most American" of his works, though what he means in reality is that it is the most truly Indian. One can go further and say, as Professor Franco has done, that Hombres de maíz "represents the most ambitious attempt so far made by a Spanish-American writer to penetrate the mind of the Indian and write a novel informed by Indian psychology."<sup>2</sup> However, she goes on to qualify this:

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1. A conversation with the author in May 1967 confirmed what he had already said to this effect in an interview with R. Marra-López, "Oda y elegía de Centroamérica", Insula XVI, no. 175 (June 1961), p. 3. Asturias is unashamedly proud of the novel, for, with the objectivity of a retrospective view, he can "scarcely believe" he is its author.
  2. The Modern Culture of Latin America (Pall Mall Press, London 1967), p. 111.

At the same time, remarkable as it is in its penetrating insight into the Indian mind, the novel does illustrate the paradox of the Indianist writer, for it presents tremendous difficulties to the reader whose knowledge of Guatemalan Indian psychology is non-existent. On the other hand, the novel cannot communicate to the Indian himself, since most Indians are illiterate. Even if the Indian were to learn to read, he would then almost certainly adopt European ways of thought and would no longer look at experience through the eyes of Gaspar Ilóm. (3)

It is true that the seemingly almost perverse strangeness which has always been a hallmark of Asturias' style is here even more in evidence, and given the inherent obscurity of the subject matter the result must seem very near to hermeticism for all but the most persistent of readers. This should not be exaggerated, however, for the novel is by no means impenetrable and repays careful examination. If we could not understand other ways of thinking and being than our own, then literature would have a very limited range indeed. It is precisely because Hombres de maíz does make the Indian ethos comprehensible to us whilst contrasting it with our own that it provides one of those experiences which only literature can offer. Its effects could only have been achieved at the risk of a certain degree of obscurity, and Asturias was on this occasion fully prepared to take such a risk.<sup>4</sup> More even than El Señor

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3. Franco, p.112.

4. "Es una cosa pura, limpia, mía. Fue el libro que menos corregí." So Asturias told me in September 1967. Professor Franco's concern seems to me to be a little misplaced, and would logically seem to imply that not only the anthropological novel, but anthropology itself, is ultimately doomed to failure, since it is impossible to enter the minds of others so different from ourselves. There seems also to be an implicit suggestion that Asturias' novel should stand on its "accuracy" in recording and interpreting Indian thought. The question of how well Asturias understands the Indians is in

Presidente, Hombres de maíz involves the problems of the poem, or rather, of the poem-in-the-novel. Asturias attempts to recreate Indian life in the novel form in much the same way that Lorca interpreted gipsy life in the Romancero gitano, with similar motivation and technique.

Hombres de maíz falls within the tradition of the novela de la tierra, and more particularly the novela indianista reaching back through El mundo es ancho y ajeno, Huasipungo, and Raza de bronce as far as Aves sin nido. Though his novel presents a vision of the Indian quite different from any of its predecessors, Asturias identifies emotionally with the Indianist movement, and is quite content to be classified with its writers, despite their fall from grace over the last thirty years. Indeed, he is given to visualising himself as one of a long line extending back to El libro de los libros de Chilam Balam or Ollantay, remnants of the Maya and Inca civilisations respectively. In an interview with Claude Couffon he first confided the romantic notion he has of himself as the Gran Lengua of his country, that is, the descendant of the Maya sages whose function it was to learn and repeat the oral traditions of their tribal history.<sup>5</sup> Amazingly, the Indians of Guatemala

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fact frequently raised in Guatemala, where many people are only too eager to assure the visitor that Hombres de maíz proves only that its author knows nothing about the Indians. Although my own impression is that, on the contrary, Asturias is every bit as well acquainted with the Guatemalan Indian as any non-anthropologist could hope to be, I should in any case subscribe to the opinion of Francisco Méndez, "Fama, palabra y magia de Miguel Angel Asturias", Salón 13 I, no.1 (Guatemala, Nov 1960), p.105. Even if these accusations are true, says Méndez, "no quita a las leyendas apócrifas, y al desaliñado decir, y al falso indio de Asturias la magia de que el poeta los inviste y que hace ver todo como recién salido del útero mismo de Guatemala. De verdades de ese calibre está llena la gloria de muchos hombres, incluso egregios."

5. Hispanoamerica en su nueva literatura (Santander, 1962), pp.47-8. See also a poem by Asturias called "El Gran Lengua", in Cuadernos Americanos, cxv, 2 (Mar-April, 1961), p.200. See also p.23 above.

have somehow found out about Asturias' efforts on their behalf, and he views with great satisfaction the title they have conferred upon him: "El Jefe Maya". If a legend were to grow around his own name, there is no doubt he would like it to be along these lines.

However, if we confine ourselves less ambitiously to the course of Latin American literature over the last century, it is clear that Hombres de maíz has no close predecessors. The nearest comparison that can be made to it in conception is probably Carpentier's El reino de este mundo, which appeared in the very same year. Fernando Alegría sees a clear case for regarding Asturias and Carpentier as the precursors of the present generation of younger writers on the grounds that it was they who first saw the possibilities of using indigenous mythical material rather than the standard sources of European literary inspiration.<sup>6</sup> Carpentier's short novel is, like all his work, essentially European in tone, but does attempt to interpret the primitive--in his case, Negro--mind through a historical recreation in the context of its own mythology of magical beliefs.

The problem of communicating "primitive" thought patterns in fiction is a recurrent one in Latin America, and is clearly one of the reasons for the wide influence of Faulkner. It had been brilliantly handled by the Brazilian writer, Graciliano Ramos, whose moving vision of an illiterate, simple-minded sertanejo in Vidas secas (1938) is unsurpassed in Latin American fiction. Spanish American novelists, by contrast, had proved quite unequal to the task of interpreting the life of the Indians with a language and a cultural tool--the novel--which were foreign to them. It is now a commonplace of Latin American criticism

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6. See page 21 above.

that writers like López y Fuentes, Icaza and Ciro Aleg-ría, and even those like Gallegos or Güiraldes, who depicted people of intermediate cultural backgrounds, failed to achieve the necessary degree of closeness and penetration into their subjects. Historically, their novels have served as the foundation for a growing tradition, the first terms of a wider literary definition, but they were often little more than traveller's tales (what Juan Loveluck has called "mental tourism") at one extreme, or socio-political documents at the other. Among the best known Don Segundo Sombra, for example, is a fine book, but the emotions expressed in it are almost entirely those of Güiraldes, not the gauchos, and it is this which ultimately gives the novel a sense of two-dimensionality. It is not so much concerned with the evocation and interpretation of a given reality as with the author's personal reaction to it. Like Güiraldes, Rómulo Gallegos occasionally makes use of popular folk tales and regional legends, but lacks the subtlety of mind to relate them in any meaningful way to the psychological life of his characters, leaving his novels as neat cardboard constructions erected in each case around one good idea.

Asturias was the first major writer to perceive and successfully exploit the possibilities for using autochthonous mythologies in novels concerned with countries where there was a significant indigenous population. His own anthropological studies and the linguistic experience gained from translating Maya texts gave him an insight not available to other writers.<sup>7</sup> The first result of this experience was Leyendas de Guatemala (1930). The first half of the work suggests a somewhat excitable Azorín and com-

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7. When Asturias travelled to Europe in 1924, he went first to London and spent much time in the British Museum. On settling in Paris he enrolled in a course on Amerindian cultures at the Sorbonne under Georges Raynaud, and collaborated in translating Popol Vuh and Anales de los xahil, this at a time when few people had even heard of the Mayas.

prises a series of vignettes recounting various old Mayan and imported Spanish legends. These are virtually the only pieces of "classical", relatively restrained prose to be found in Asturias' entire output. Cuculcán, an item added to this collection at a later date, is much more characteristic of Asturias' later mode, and is an attempt at emulating--with modern poetic awareness--the Maya ritual play-ballets, of which the great surviving example is the Rabinal Achí.

The main sources on which Asturias draws for his mythological detail are the old chronicles written down by Maya scribes after the Conquest: Popol Vuh, Anales de los xahil, El libro de los libros de Chilam Balam, and Rabinal Achí. Beyond this he is thoroughly versed in the chronicles of the Conquistadores themselves, and the mass of research into the Maya period and into modern Guatemala undertaken by a multitude of archaeologists and anthropologists. A certain familiarity with this material is therefore essential if one is to understand many of the references in Hombres de maíz and Mulata de tal, but no critic has yet shown any sign of obtaining such a familiarity.

The novel takes its title from the story of American man's creation in the Popol Vuh. After several failures with mud and wood the gods of creation decide to make man of maize, thereby sanctifying the plant:

De los frutos cosechados comerán los pobladores que han de venir. Tendrán de este modo igual naturaleza que su comida. Nunca tendrán otra. Morirán el día que lleguen a tenerla distinta. (8)

The men of maize in the novel are the contemporary highland Indians of Guatemala, some of whom are still vaguely

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8. E.A.Gómez, Las leyendas del Popol Vuh (Austral, Buenos Aires, 1951), p.16. I have followed Asturias' own procedure, using whichever of the many texts throw light on his novel.

aware of their own ancient cultural heritage,<sup>9</sup> whilst others, the majority, who have never known where they come from, are still living under its influence after four centuries of European intrusion.

In the first part, Gaspar Ilóm, an Indian cacique, wages war against an organised group of commercial maize-planters who are invading the forest upland areas and leaving a trail of waste and destruction behind them. The Indians cultivate only as much of the sacred crop as they need to subsist,<sup>10</sup> but the demands of the profit-seeking planters are limitless. The clash of attitudes leads to real violence, with the title of the novel merely symbolising the whole system of Indian customs and values in retreat before the advance of Western civilisation. This cosmogonic theory which is behind the clash is later reinforced by various other references and influences in the text from the old Maya manuscripts, most prominently the identification of the male figure with the maize, and by extension with the maize-giving land, and the female figures with the rain. Verzasconi, whose study contains the only serious attempt so far to explain Hombres de maíz, makes a wholly mistaken interpretation based on the seemingly logical theory that the woman represents the earth; this in direct contradiction of the revealed truth at the conclusion of the novel and the evidence of the Popol Vuh:<sup>11</sup>

Luego, para distinguirlas [a las mujeres], les pusieron nombres apropiados, los cuales eran de mucho encanto. Cada nombre evocaba la imagen de la lluvia según las estaciones.<sup>12</sup>

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9. "Nuestros antepasados, los indios que estuvieron aquí otro día", as one Indian expressed it to me.

10. Many Indians in Yucatán and Guatemala still stubbornly adhere to this custom. The refusal to grow more than they need and hence to enter into the national economy is the despair of their apologists in Latin America, and was one of the main reasons for the failure of the 1952 Bolivian Revolution.

11. R.A.Verzasconi, "Magical Realism and the Literary



Further overt references are to "El Bastón Rojo de los Mantenimientos" (the Indian equivalent of the Staff of Life), "Lugar de Abundancia" (the Quiche Garden of Eden-cum-Heaven), and Xibalbá (the Quiche underground Hell). Such details give the novel an extra dimension which is almost biblical, but the influence of the Po-pol Vuh and other such works is not confined to subject matter alone. Much of the syntactical organisation and metaphorisation follows Quiche models; and the recurrent themes--the mystery of life and death, vengeance, fertility, and metamorphosis--are also very much an echo of the Maya chronicles transformed by Asturias within coherent literary dimensions. This portrayal of the Indians in the context of their own historical and legendary background serves to deepen their collective characterisation, particularly as the novel attempts to show that new myths and legends are constantly emerging from this collective existence, thereby emphasising the keynote of this book as a whole: the contrast between the temporality of the individual life and the continuity of the collective life. Asturias himself has indicated the significance of his use of legends in the novel:

Refiriéndome a Hombres de maíz, intenté y creo haberlo logrado, una novela en la que presento como aspecto social de la vida americana el hecho tan corriente entre nosotros, y que todos hemos vivido, de sucesos reales que la imaginación popular transforma en leyendas o de leyendas que llegan a encarnar acontecimientos de la vida diaria. A mí me parece muy importante en el existir americano esa zona en que se confunden, sin límite alguno, la irrealidad real, como diría Unamuno, de lo legendario con la vida misma de los personajes. (13)

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World of Miguel Angel Asturias" (Unpubd. Ph.D diss., University of Washington, 1965).

12. Gómez, pp.27-28.

13. Trigueros de León, op.cit., p.108.

Thus in addition to details referring us back in time, there are innumerable off-hand references to contemporary Indian or Ladino superstitions or quack medical beliefs, all presented by Asturias as if they were undisputably true, as indeed they are to those who believe in them. Lastly, as has been suggested, all these details gain in force of conviction from the narrative proper, wherein characters and events from earlier sections themselves become mythical figures before the end. The transmutations of the foreground action are reflected and reinforced by the various layers of background detail, and the body of legend is seen to have its own continuous existence and in this way to overcome the limitations of time. Inevitably literary anthropology in the novel combines with sociological aspects to inform a situation on the "real" plane. This is the war between the Indians and the Ladino maiceros which is the novel's point of departure. Historically, the reason for the conflict is the invasion of ancient communal lands by commercial planters; psychologically, the struggle is visualised in terms of the two differing concepts of maize, condensed by Luis Alberto Sánchez into "el maíz-símbolo" and "el maíz-útil". The unified correspondence between socio-economic realities and psychological motivation is maintained in all aspects of the novel through a series of subtle devices which present fact with fiction in a tightly woven synthesis.

Although the subject matter of Hombres de maíz is wholly distinct from that of El Señor Presidente, Asturias' fictional method is very similar, a fact which has escaped all critics of the two novels up to the present time. Different subject matter and the need to recreate a collective, rather than an individually oriented, Weltanschauung, naturally imposes modifications upon his conception, but critics have tended to assume that these were more considerable than they in fact are. The pur-

pose of this chapter is to produce a coherent and largely independent structural view of Hombres de maíz which will at the same time show in what ways it may be compared to El Señor Presidente. The method will be much the same as the one employed in Chapter III. It will be shown that as a result of its attempt to construct a collective consciousness, Hombres de maíz can in a sense be said to resemble a Mayan bas-relief, built up from a series of separate but inter-related panels. The first half of the study seeks to trace the way in which Asturias points the direction of the novel as a whole in each of its functional parts; and, more specifically, it tries to examine the means by which the Indian and Ladino views of reality are adapted to the demands of a literary form and interpreted through the medium of that form itself. The second half is an attempt to reconstruct the complete literary edifice.

## 1. THE STRUCTURE OF EXISTENCE: TWO SEPARATE WORLDS

The overall structure of the novel, including the internal structure of Part I, will be outlined in the second half of the present chapter. Suffice to say for the moment that Part I falls into three almost exactly equal sections, each of which concentrates in microcosmic form certain themes and technical devices that may be regarded as representative of the work as a whole. The three sections are concerned, respectively, with the Indian conception of existence, the Ladinos' sharply contrasting view, and the eventual physical clash between the two cultural groups which prepares the way for the themes and incidents of the rest of the novel. Aspects of Asturias' approach to each of these questions are analysed individually, in order to present a view of Asturias' technique in this novel similar to the one proposed with relation to El Señor Presidente, namely a view in which technique is conceived as discovery.

### The Indians

Asturias no busca al indio para ahormarlo a su estilo; se reduce él mismo al molde indígena, de donde proviene su irresistible originalidad, su intransferible aura poética. (14)

This comment by Luis Alberto Sánchez gives the lie to the belief that Asturias is an explosive, inspirational writer with little concern for problems of method, and is still the most perceptive guide for an analysis of Hombres de maíz. It follows that if Asturias has made a serious effort to re-view the world through Indian eyes, the reader must make an equally serious effort to follow the process

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14. Luis Alberto Sánchez, La tierra del quetzal (Santiago de Chile, 1950), p.191.

of recreation. But no critic has yet done so. The opening passage of the novel illuminates Asturias' approach to the problem in the clearest way possible, and will be quoted in full. The themes grouped there in condensed form expand to suggest episodes which weave the various parts together. The prose is so close to poetry that the only way to evaluate it is to examine it in detail in order to relate the details to the themes and techniques of the whole. The novel opens as commercial planters invade the forests of the region of Ilóm, where only the Indians have lived until now. The planters are clearing land for the cultivation of maize, and Gaspar Ilóm, the Indian cacique, is wondering what he should do:

- 1)        -El Gaspar Ilóm deja que a la tierra de Ilóm le roben el sueño de los ojos.  
          -El Gaspar Ilóm deja que a la tierra de Ilóm le boten los párpados con hacha...  
          -El Gaspar Ilóm deja que a la tierra de Ilóm le chamusquen la ramazón de las pestañas con las quemas que ponen la luna color de hormiga vieja...
- 2)        El Gaspar Ilóm movía la cabeza de un lado a otro. Negar, moler la acusación del suelo en que estaba dormido con su petate, su sombra y su mujer y enterrado con sus muertos y su ombligo, sin poder deshacerse de una culebra de seiscientas mil vueltas de lodo, luna, bosques, aguaceros, montañas, pájaros y retumbos que sentía alrededor del cuerpo.
- 3)        -La tierra cae soñando de las estrellas, pero despierta en las que fueron montañas, hoy cerros pelados de Ilóm, donde el guarda canta con lloro de barranco, vuela de cabeza el gavián, anda el zompopo, gime la espumuy y duerme con su petate, su sombra y su mujer el que debía trozar los párpados a los que hachan los árboles, quemar las pestañas a los que chamuscan el monte y enfriar el cuerpo a los que atajan el agua de los ríos que corriendo duerme y no ve nada pero atajada en las pozas abre los ojos y lo ve todo con mirada honda...
- 4)        El Gaspar se estiró, se encogió, volvió a mover la cabeza de un lado a otro para moler la acusación del suelo, atado de sueño y muerte

por la culebra de seiscientas mil vueltas de lodo, luna, bosques, aguaceros, montañas, lagos, pájaros y retumbos que le martajaba los huesos hasta convertirlo en una masa de frijol negro; goteaba noche de profundidades.

5) Y oyó, con los hoyos de sus orejas oyó:  
-Conejos amarillos en el cielo, conejos amarillos en el monte, conejos amarillos en el agua guerrearán con el Gaspar. Empezará la guerra el Gaspar Ilóm arrastrado por su sangre, por su río, por su habla de ñudos ciegos...

6) La palabra del suelo hecha llama solar estuvo a punto de quemarles las orejas de tuza a los conejos amarillos en el cielo, a los conejos amarillos en el monte, a los conejos amarillos en el agua; pero el Gaspar se fue volviendo tierra que cae de donde cae la tierra, es decir, sueño que no encuentra sombra para soñar en el suelo de Ilóm y nada pudo la llama solar de la voz burlada por los conejos amarillos que se pegaron a mamar en un papayal, convertidos en papayas del monte, que se pegaron al cielo, convertidos en estrellas, y se disiparon en el agua como reflejos con orejas.

(OE I, pp.535-36)

The complexity of this passage derives from a combination of effects developed in modern fiction and poetry, backed by other devices as old as literature. The formal structure of the six paragraphs is an alternation between the reported chant of the land and straightforward narrative by the author, a response which reveals the effect of the chanting upon Gaspar Ilóm. Again we find the author declining to introduce or explain his opening situation, contriving instead to maximise reader participation by simulating the immediacy of actual sensation in life. Asturias is weaving a spell, and doesn't wish to break it.

Paragraph 1 is both the lament of the land at having been awoken from the sleep of ages, and a reproof against Gaspar Ilóm for not retaliating on its behalf against the incursions of the commercial planters. Its rhythmical

repetitions are presumably intended to suggest the beating of war drums. More than this, though, they begin to create the impression of an ordered conception of existence, with a co-ordinated system of hierarchies and of obligations between their different levels.<sup>15</sup> Primitive man lives in a world he is unable to understand, according to our use of that word. Where more advanced civilisations eventually postulate the possibility of there being one prime mover of all affairs, primitive cultures conceive different deities responsible for each natural agency, and in this way explain the world to themselves and begin to impose order upon it. The Guatemalan Indians of Maya descent have evolved their own polytheistic structure, which in Hombres de maíz is re-imagined by Asturias in a characteristically personal manner.

Paragraph 1 is made up of two elements, one reiterative ("El Gaspar Ilóm deja que a la tierra de Ilóm le ..."), the other variable on forest-clearing methods. It first states and then elaborates a metaphor dependent upon the sleep-dream equation in sueño so often exploited in Hispanic literature.<sup>16</sup> The first sentence is a succinct metaphorical statement of the basic conflict in Part I as a whole. The incantation of the land condemns Gaspar for his negligence in allowing it to be kept awake. The second sentence says that its eyelids (trunks, stems) are being hacked down; the third that its eyelashes (branches, leaves) are being burned. As far as agents are concerned, this first paragraph (1) imputes guilt to someone it names

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15. Asturias is in fact attempting to provide what Lévi-Strauss would call a "model" of the kind of semio-logical jungle Agustín Yañez describes in Mitos indígenas, 3rd ed. (UNAM, Mexico 1964), p.xiv: "Otro de los elementos constitutivos del alma indígena [es] su capacidad poética, en sentido estricto. El hombre prehispánico se mueve dentro de una selva intrincada de ficciones construidas con realidades heterogéneas, y no hay paso que carezca de sentido cabalístico..."

16. See B.L.Whorf, Language, Thought and Reality, 2nd ed.

as Gaspar Ilóm, and (2) establishes the presence of two further third person agents: whoever is chanting (the land, as it turns out), and whoever is guilty of the destruction which has provoked the chant (the maiceros). This immediately heightens the reader's normal level of receptivity through an unconsciously felt need for these two agents to be identified, a purposive use of mystery which is one of the central features of the novel.

For the present this use of mystery is illustrated by the apparent obscurity at the end of the paragraph: "las quemas que ponen la luna color de hormiga vieja..." It takes a moment's thought to see the writer's meaning. Ants are almost transparent when born, but gradually become opaque with age. The association fire-smoke automatically bridges the logical gulf quemas-luna color de hormiga vieja, for it is evidently the smoke rising to the sky which partially obscures the moon and therefore seems to change its colour. The author has materialised something which was only a temporary visual effect because of its symbolic value, and already a world real to the Indians, but as yet unreal to us, is beginning to take shape. Furthermore, in order to appreciate this image the reader is forced to make a mental effort which necessarily involves a full imaginative commitment to the situation, impressing upon him not only the apparent colour metamorphosis undergone by the moon, but also the relative spatial positions of the moon, the smoke, and himself. He therefore steps into the novel. Asturias lends conviction to his unreal world through carefully induced reader participation, which in turn ensures a proper subsequent appreciation of the ominous implications traditionally associated in all cultures with eclipses of the

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in paperback (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1966), pp. 187-88, for a consideration of these fixed-variable structures, which are characteristic of Maya codices.



moon. And these, again, re-echo the mood created by the lament of the land, which itself is a response to precisely the same thing: the upsetting of a state of natural order.

Multi-functional techniques such as these produce the tight internal structure which characterises all aspects of the novel, and which again corresponds to Asturias' literary analysis of his hecho central. Here the structure emerges from a pattern which is a stylistic response to the classificatory structure evolved by Indian thought. The first paragraph has the land personified not as a mere literary convention, but as a natural transference of Indian beliefs to the novel. The land "sees" through its vegetation, as if growth itself were a form of understanding. Its <sup>ids</sup>eyelashes are trunks and stems, its eyelashes leaves and branches. The average reader will find this an acceptable and immediately meaningful imaginative expression. For Asturias, however, the device conceals a further level of significance through his informed awareness of the scope of the language of the Maya-Quiche as set down in their sacred books after the Conquest. Their language, in common with many primitive tongues, used single words to mean a variety of things with one shared attribute. The word used to signify "eyelids" was a general term meaning any kind of shell or crust, anything that covers something else.<sup>17</sup>

This aspect of pre-Columbian language in Central America is fertile ground for cultivating metaphor systems, since a metaphor is at bottom a comparison or contrast of two essentially different things which share one or more attributes in common. Having helped to translate Maya

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17. See Alfredo Barrera Vásquez and Silvia Rendón, El libro de los libros de Chilam Balam (FCE, Mexico 1948), pp.53-55. C.M.Bowra, Primitive Song (London 1962) is also useful for comparing Asturias' literary structures with authentic examples of "primitive" expression.

texts into Spanish, Asturias has an insight into their fictional possibilities unique among novelists, and the metaphor elaborated in the first paragraph is one result. Another is the choice of Ilóm, an area which actually exists, as the family name of the Indian cacique, for ilom meant "head" or "principal part", "principal actor";<sup>18</sup> Gaspar's identity with the land is clear enough in any case, but he is not just a symbol for it: in the Indian conception he is a part of the land, and the land is part of him. This is the conceptual basis of Part I. Gaspar is obliged to wake up when the land complains that it cannot sleep, for the land's suffering is truly his own.

It is clear, then, that Asturias uses certain aspects of Meso-American language to fashion a part authentic, part literary metaphorical structure, thereby lending implicit support to the view that language itself helps to shape our perception of reality.<sup>19</sup> The Indians of modern Guatemala are here recreated in part through a poetic interpretation of certain historical aspects of their own language, and in the context of episodes from the Popol Vuh. In other cases Asturias merely takes Indian names, translated into Spanish, to inspire the creation of characters and incidents in his novels, so that the action really can be said to lie partly within the meanings of the words themselves. The narrative of Mulata de tal is in large measure dependent on the materialisation into episodes of names to be found in the Maya sacred books. Although all this might seem to add weight to the allegations of obscurity so frequently

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18. Barrera Vásquez and Rendón, p.58, n.1. I am indebted to Miss Gillian Briggs for the information that the clash in Part I of this novel is based on events at the turn of the century, recalled in the Imparcial (Guatemala City) for 4th January 1927.
19. Whorf, op.cit., is no doubt the best known exponent of this theory.

levelled at Asturias, it does not in fact matter greatly that the reader cannot know the source of concepts like the ojos-párpados-pestañas chain in the first paragraph, as long as they have at least one clear layer of meaning, which is certainly the case. The informed critic will find that the impression of depth felt by every reader is confirmed by further analysis, for it is the very essence of the novel. We are soon made aware that the world of this novel is not our accustomed world, that there is a mysterious significance underlying the variable manifestations of surface reality. We have stressed this linguistic procedure mainly to show that the overall structure, with its eventual synthesis of the land-sky aspect in the Indian dualist belief pattern, is matched by similarly conceived contrasts and image structures in even the shortest paragraphs, particularly in the first half of the novel. Like the hieroglyphic designs on Maya buildings and sculptures, we can see here the slow creation of a vast allegorical idea from multitudes of tiny geometrically patterned fragments. These are not always purely Indian in conception, but all are marked by the same sorts of cohesive poetic disciplines examined above.

Meaning apart, brief mention should be made of the rhythmical quality of paragraph 1, for rhythm is an essentially primitive form of order which helps determine the structure of a sentence or paragraph, just as incidents, themes, chapters point the structure of the whole. No writer of Spanish prose, Valle-Inclán not excepted, can have had a wider mastery of its rhythms. This paragraph combines meaning, sound (with the contrasting suggestiveness of "robar el sueño de los ojos", "botar los párpados con hacha", and "chamuscarse la ramazón de las pestañas"), and rhythm, to produce a totally unified whole which suggests the wholeness of psychic experience.

The passage is reminiscent in both form and function of the opening scene of El Señor Presidente, reminiscent also of Cara de Angel's train journey. It is more complex than either, however.

Leaving the first paragraph for the second, we can examine the author's description of Gaspar's reaction to the accusation. It is worth noting that the key verb in paragraph 1 is deja, in the present tense. In paragraph 3 it is debía, an imperfect used conditionally to tell what Gaspar ought to do. In paragraph 5 it is empezará, in the future. In other words, there is a progressive movement from an expression of dismay at Gaspar's present posture of cowardly passivity, through a statement of the vengeance he ought to be wreaking on the maiceros, to a confident final assertion that Gaspar Ilóm will indeed defend his heritage against outside interference. These verbs are the vertebrae of the passage, and point its direction. Meanwhile paragraphs 2 and 4 describe Gaspar's vain attempts to resist the call of his conscience:

- 2) El Gaspar Ilóm movía la cabeza de un lado a otro. Negar, moler la acusación del suelo...
- 4) El Gaspar se estiró, se encogió, volvió a mover la cabeza de un lado a otro...

The same kind of probing technique is apparent here as was used in paragraph 1, where we saw the progressive elaboration of the original parallelism:

sueño	-	ojos	-	párpados	-	pestañas
[ vida ]	-	[ vegetación ]	-	[ troncos ]	-	[ follaje ]
[ naturaleza ]	-	[ selva ]	-	[ árboles ]	-	[ ramas ]

In paragraph 2 Asturias describes an action ("movía la cabeza de un lado a otro"), conceptualises it ("negar"), and finally metaphorises it ("Moler") by comparing it both in appearance and purpose to a grinding motion. However, Gaspar is unsuccessful in his attempt to grind the accusation out of his mind, for it is he who is ground down

("la culebra...le martajaba los huesos hasta convertirlo en una masa de frijol negro") until his resistance finally breaks.

In paragraph 4 this resistance can be seen growing ever more desperate as the moral pressure exerted by the land is intensified. Gaspar moves outwards ("se estiró"), inwards ("se encogió"), and then to either side ("volvió a mover la cabeza de un lado a otro"). Where in paragraph 2 the writer probed the semantic potential of one evasive movement alone, in paragraph 4 he shows how Gaspar exhausts the possibilities of evasion. In either case, what is important is the way the character is gradually being tied down by his own indissoluble commitment to a fixed conception of existence. However, we are not only told that the character is tied to a certain view of the world, that he has no other way of thinking or being: Asturias himself pins the character down to his view of the world as we read. He achieves this by establishing a stylistic pattern which seeks to reflect Indian category structures at the same time as it patterns the narrative itself in harmony with the thematic requirements of the novel as a whole.

The first part, then, and specifically these first six parts of the initial section evoke a view of reality embracing firstly the concrete world of nature and its repository in man, that is, his system of instincts; secondly, the Indian's personal understanding of nature, and his attempts to make a coherent pattern of the mystery immanent in existence, and in the relation between his own instincts and the realities of nature. Gaspar Ilóm is reluctant to fight because he is tied by all that is dear to him as an individual (p.537, "Como desatarse de la siembra, de la mujer, de los hijos, del rancho"). Yet at the same time the land itself, a more abstract, timeless concept, is calling on him to defend it, for only if the land is free

to live its dream can the Indian heritage be safeguarded. (Gaspar's role as a focus of continuity is beautifully expressed on p.546: "El Gaspar, flor amarilla en el vaivén del tiempo").

That Gaspar is not free to act as he pleases is underlined by another detail in paragraph 2 borrowed from Maya mythology, la culebra de seiscientas mil vueltas, a further example of the Indian tendency to reduce chaos to unity. The Maya saw the world as a great serpent (two-headed in their conception, to account for the earth-sky polarity), thereby allowing heterogeneity ("Seiscientas mil vueltas de lodo, luna, bosques", etc.) within a unitary conception ("la culebra").<sup>20</sup> The snake was a central symbol in pre-Columbian civilisations, and usually signified some relation with the earth or with sexual intercourse, which may provide a cue for the subsequent act between Gaspar and Piojosa. There is a Lévi-Straussian logic in Asturias' use of the snake symbol here, for is the snake represents Gaspar's telluric world, and if Gaspar himself is inescapably a part of that world, then the reproductive function must be viewed as the essential link between them, since reproduction is mankind's means of emulating the permanence of the land itself.<sup>21</sup>

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20. Domingo Martínez Paredes, Hunab Ku: Síntesis del pensamiento filosófico maya (Editorial Orion, Mexico 1964), devotes much of his analysis to an interpretation of the significance of the snake symbol, and concludes that it is all-embracing: "Serpiente de la energía que da medida [i.e. time] and space] y movimiento [i.e. life]. Pluralidad de la unidad en el concepto filosófico maya." (p.69) On p.89 he remarks that the priests and others among the initiated were called "los tragados por la serpiente de la sabiduría". Cf ninth para of the novel: "Se lo tragó una media luna sin dientes, sin morderlo, sorbido del aire, como un pez pequeño."

21. J.Eric S.Thompson, in Maya Hieroglyphic Writing (Univ. of Oklahoma Press, Norman 1960), provides a fascinating parallel to Asturias' technique here with its professional analysis of "open-ended" Maya glyphs.

Continuing with paragraph 2 we can see the same kind of classification and contrast as in its predecessor. Gaspar is (1) "dormido [en el suelo] con su petate, su sombra y su mujer"; (2) "enterrado [en el suelo] con sus muertos y su ombligo" (all italics in quotations are mine). This antithesis pivots on the divergent meanings of en, alternately signifying above or below the ground. The first statement refers to the material situation, Gaspar lying asleep on the ground, with his shadow (a suggestion of the occult) and his wife for company. The second statement refers to the Indian's belief that all his forefathers somehow live on in his own person. By a logical transference he feels that his spirit is also buried with them, just as his umbilical cord is buried when he is born, to protect him from harm and to consecrate his relation with the land that will sustain him until he too is at last buried there. These two elements are finally linked as Gaspar is tied inextricably to the culebra de seiscientas mil vueltas, which represents not the small plot on which he himself is sleeping, but the whole expanse of the land in a more abstract, generalised sense. When, after this internal dialogue between man and reality, the two conceptions are finally reconciled, Gaspar will know what he must do.

If we move for a moment to paragraph 4 we can see in fact how Asturias unobtrusively puts these three elements into retrospective focus through a condensed parallelism. Gaspar is now said to be "atado de sueño y muerte". Atado refers to the snake (it is the inverse of "sin poder deshacerse" in paragraph 2); sueño refers back to dormido; and muerte refers back to enterrado, thereby neatly tying the knot.

Paragraph 3 is woven into a similar pattern. The chant is resumed and picks up the original idea of the

land losing its sleep, its ability to dream. The contrast "las que fueron montañas, hoy cerros pelados de Ilóm", indicates the destruction of the vegetation in a more general sense and from a more distant, less hermetic standpoint, providing a rapid switch of perspective. There follows an enumeration of some of the creatures living in the mountains, and again there is a clear pattern:

- |    |                                  |                            |
|----|----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1) | el guarda <u>canta</u>           | (sound)                    |
| 2) | <u>vuela</u> ...el gavilán       | (motion)                   |
| 3) | <u>anda</u> el zompopo           | (motion)                   |
| 4) | <u>gime</u> la espumuy           | (sound)                    |
| 5) | y <u>duerme</u> [el Gaspar Ilóm] | (soundless,<br>motionless) |

The contrast between Gaspar's passivity and the animation outside--all these creatures are behaving naturally and Gaspar is not--foreshadows the subsequent enumeration of the things he should do:

- 1) trozar los párpados a los que hachan los árboles
- 2) quemar las pestañas a los que chamuscan el monte
- 3) enfriar el cuerpo a los que atajan el agua de los ríos

The land is urging Gaspar to take what might be called "sympathetic" revenge upon the maiceros by doing to them what they are doing to the land of Ilóm. Structurally, it is important to realise that this demand is fulfilled in just this fashion in Parts II, III and IV. The novel develops from Part I by means of a whole series of expanding symbols which spread like the ripples of pebbles dropped in a pool. While on the subject of water, it will be noticed that another element has been added here to those listed in paragraph 1, the river:

...corriendo duerme y no ve nada pero atajada en las pozas abre los ojos y lo ve todo con mirada honda...



The normal running of the water is an unconscious, natural process which is obstructed at the cost of the river awakening and becoming aware of itself and of the wider world. This note preludes the experience of Goyo Yic (Part V), and is illuminating as a parallel for Asturias' conception of the overall structure, as we shall see below. The novel is in six parts, the first five of which are together exactly as long as the last part. The first part, and indeed the first half of the novel, is written entirely in a style calculated to reproduce Indian modes of perception, but from the start of Part VI the almost mesmeric sense of density disappears, to recur only at intervals. The sixth part is apparently set in the recent past (i.e., probably 1948). By this time the events of the first five parts are legendary material, even though some of the characters are still alive. Events are treated in a far more discursive manner, and much of the narrative is concerned with the theory and practice of mythification. Thus the first half of the novel is an attempt at a faithful exposition of the natural Indian reality (ahistorical), whilst the second brings gradual illumination in terms of European awareness (crítico-historical). Hence the parallel with the river dammed by the maiceros. Part VI is the pool into which all the earlier currents flow.

The running of the river is expressed by a series of short unpunctuated words (contrast this with the syntax of the rest of the passage) brought to a sudden halt by the contrasting impression of depth in the very vowel structure of "con mirada honda...." It provides one more example of Asturias' fusion of form and subject matter, a fusion which in this novel is expanded into the structural contrast between the two halves of the work as a whole. In the second half Nicho Aquino, the representative of the Indians who have lost contact with their own cultural tradition, is given an insight into his personal disorientation.

Thus the river is adduced as another example of the state of nature as a dream (dreams are timeless, a link between past and present; myths are collective dreams), paralleling the references to the land itself in paragraphs 1 and 3, and to Gaspar in paragraphs 2 and 4. In all these cases the clear inference is that the preordained existence of all natural phenomena is that of a dream, a purely functional process, unconscious and unchanging. Man's arrogant self-determination awakens the land by destroying its defences and leaving its eyes exposed to the sun's glare; and awakens the river by abruptly diverting it from its natural course into stagnating dams. Clearly, this emphasis on the waking-sleeping antithesis is highly important as a guide to Asturias' whole approach to life and literature, with sueño a key word which summarises his transformation of modern psychoanalytical and anthropological concepts onto a literary plane.

We must now examine the conceptual basis of the whole passage, for it is one of the pillars of the novel. We must modify our assertion that the chanting is the lament and accusation of the land. This is how it seems to Gaspar, and the whole passage is narrated from his point of view. But of course the truth is that there is no lament, there are no war drums beating, there is no snake with six hundred thousand coils. All these things are a part of the vision which results from Gaspar's understanding of reality, which is part of a collective vision, not a part of the objective world around him. The snake is his understanding of the diverse phenomena of the natural world, while the chant of the earth, rhythmical and insistent as if accompanied by the ominous beating of drums, is his own conscience, accompanied by the beating of his own heart (pp.537-38: "Lo golpeaba la tumbazón de los latidos"). Gaspar's identification with the land is so absolute that any harm done to it is harm done to him; he awakens when

the land awakens because he is the land. The achievement of the book is that it enables the reader actually to experience this vision of the world from within Gaspar's own grasp of it.

One of the reasons for the artistic unity of Hombres de maíz is Asturias' approach to characterisation, which throws a new light on conceptions such as E.M. Forster's well-known theory of the "prophetic" novel, whose characters are real as individuals and yet also transcendent symbols of a wider truth. None of Asturias' characters is ever truly individualised, but even his caricatures gain extraordinary force of conviction from the intensity of their relation to the wider dimensions of the novel as a whole. Gaspar Ilóm corresponds to this conception in a sense, not through some literary device operated by the shadowy figure of an omniscient author, but because this is precisely the way the Indians understand their own being. Naturally, there can be little stress on Gaspar as an individualised personality, but nevertheless he is both an individual tied to his own small world, with his own wife and children, and a symbol, a sharer in a wider cultural heritage whose conception embraces the whole of reality. There is a brief conflict between these two aspects in the passage under discussion--this indeed is the point of it, as we have tried to show--, but because the collective force is stronger Gaspar does indeed rise up against the maiceros for the communal good. The outcome of his struggle with conscience was never really in doubt, since he can clearly only view the defence of the land in terms of a defence of himself.

It is clear by now that the situation in this opening passage is invested with an inevitability that is literally deterministic, with Gaspar viewed almost as a victim of his heritage, a kind of receptacle or vehicle of the great Dream of nature. This inevitability is

strongly substantiated by the pronounced rhythms and by the semantic and syntactical arrangements we have isolated, whilst its trajectory follows the line of the three verbs discussed: deja-debía-empezará. The chant of the earth, Gaspar's own conscience, is also the culebra de seiscientas mil vueltas, which constricts him until he can no longer ignore its demands. The land thereby exerts pressure on him to fight, and at the same time stirs him to intercourse with his woman, an act which produces a son to maintain the tribe after Gaspar's death.<sup>22</sup>

The serpent constricts him until he is pounded into a frijol paste, no longer able to resist the full force of the earth's lament, and it is clear at this point (paragraph 5) that he will indeed lead his men against the maiceros:

Y oyó, con los hoyos de sus orejas oyó:  
-Conejos amarillos en el cielo, conejos  
amarillos en el monte, conejos amarillos  
en el agua guerrearán con el Gaspar. Em-  
pezará la guerra el Gaspar Ilóm arrastra-  
do por su sangre, por su río, por su hab-  
la de ñudos ciegos...

The rhythm intensifies here as Gaspar hears the message deep inside himself ("con los hoyos de sus orejas"). Gaspar is to go to war ("arrastrado", etc., provides yet another expression of his inner compulsion), aided by the yellow rabbits which, as the narrative later confirms, are also the firefly wizards, and both are identified with Gaspar's followers, the maize-leaf spirits: "son las hojas de maíz que forman envoltorio a las mazorcas" (p. 586). The Indian understanding of gods and spirits is that they are in all places at all times, yet still able

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22. P.539: "Se la llevaba en los pulsos cada vez más lejos. Habían pasado de sus pulsos más allá de él, más allá de ella, donde él dejaba de ser solo él y ella sola ella y se volvían especie, tribu, chorrera de sentidos. La apretó de repente ... Un puño de semillas de girasol en las entrañas."

to appear in one place at one time. This explains how the maize-leaf spirits can be in the sky, the forest and the water at one and the same time.

Finally, paragraph 6 completes this opening vision and allows it to fade away. In yet another metamorphosis the voice of the earth is construed as the heat of the sun, for since the planters stripped the earth of its vegetation the sun has been torturing the naked soil. The "voice" of the sun is its effect on the earth, just as the "voice" of the land was in fact its effect on Gaspar. This example of the intricacy of Indian thought is a useful guide to the interpretation of much that is to follow in the novel. The voice of the earth complaining is indistinguishable from the voice of the sun shining down ("la palabra del suelo hecha llama solar"), for they are part of the same situation. Within this wholeness of vision the relationship of Gaspar Ilóm to the land is strictly analogous with the relationship of sun to earth.

Gaspar is the land, Piojosa the rain, their son Martín the maize, protected by the yellow rabbits, Gaspar's men. The careful design in this part of the novel is slowly diluted into the swirling currents of the later parts, until this original pattern finally re-emerges in the synthesis of the broader final structure. The Indian understanding of the world around him is summarised in the symbolic roles attributed to these people in this one community. One must here confess the difficulty of this novel, but with two reservations: (1) Many, if not all the difficulties are resolved for the diligent reader by the text itself. The clues are well veiled and sporadic, but they are there for those who wish to find them. (2) There is no doubting that the difficulty of the novel adds greatly to its effect upon a receptive reader, for its very essence is the gradual evocation of a magic world which cannot quite be grasped, a world of metamorphoses,

incantations, bewitchment. The atmosphere of mystery is crucial.

These first six paragraphs close aptly, as the Indian vision of which (or through which) Gaspar is dreaming fades into the harsh reality of the present in the land of Ilóm. The earth--and Gaspar--falls dreaming from the stars (the Mayas believed that the stars tumble from the sky at dawn), to discover that waking life is no longer a dream. The image is an early example of the land-sky division in man's existence which is to be so important in the novel. The Indian spends the night dreaming among the stars and returns to the earth in the morning. As Gaspar falls the maize-leaf spirits fade into their natural surroundings and Gaspar finally awakens to a hostile world which has neither time nor space for him. One could see this as a symbol of all that happens in Part I and indeed in the whole of the novel until the Curandero's final triumphant affirmation. Gaspar's sleeping vision of his dearly loved world is spoiled by what he "sees" as he wakes up. The threat of its complete and permanent disappearance rouses him to action, and he prepares for the war which will bring his death.

## The Ladinos

Turning now to the arrival of the montada in Pisigüilito, we shall see the same kinds of technique adapted to a reality much closer to our own than that of Gaspar Ilóm. The scene we shall examine is the one concerning the occupation of the town by the montada and the death of the dog (pp.543-50), surely one of the most brilliant passages in all Asturias' work. Again the most striking feature is the unified pattern woven into the narrative.

The montada is in Pisigüilito to put an end to the menace of Gaspar Ilóm and his insurgent band. It is the rainy season. The air is full of foreboding. The scene is introduced as follows (my italics):

El corredor del Cabildo quedaba en alto.  
Abajo se veía la plaza panzona de agua llo-  
vida.

This rapid switching of points of view is essentially a cinematographic technique. The eye moves from the square outside the Cabildo up to the corredor, then from the vantage of the corredor itself down to the rain-soaked square. This sets the operative pattern for the scene in question. As ever Asturias, supposedly the least systematic of writers, has his narrative carefully classified into separate elements, of which the following are the most important:

- 1) The dog
- 2) The Colonel
- 3) The Colonel's men

The Colonel is sprawled in his hammock up in the corredor, whilst his men crouch dozing among their horses in the square down below. The central "character" is the dog which, covered in ringworm, and for that reason poisoned by the local chemist, runs ever more desperately around the square until finally it dies. Two of these elements

--the Colonel and his men--are described in a limited number of simple but emotive phrases. The eye returns to each of them and to the dog about four or five times, in seemingly haphazard fashion. The descriptive features repeated by the author should be noted. It is Asturias' usual method of repeating something, in a slightly different form from the original:

El jefe de la montada iba y venía por el corredor. Una tagarnina encendida en la boca, la guerrera desabrochada... (p.543)

Don Chalo, sin quitarse la tranca de la boca, sentado en una hamaca que colgaba de las vigas del corredor del Cabildo, fijó sus redondos ojos zarcos en todas las cosas, menos en la comisión... (p.544)

-¿Y ese chucho...? - preguntó el coronel desde la hamaca, atarraya de pita que en todos los pueblos lo pescaba a la hora de la siesta. (p.546)

El asistente volvió al corredor del Cabildo. El coronel Godoy seguía trepado en la hamaca, bigotudo y con los ojos abiertos, puro pescado en atarraya. (p.548)

-¡Mejor vas vos, Chalo malo! - se dijo el coronel Godoy, apeándose de la hamaca, los ojos zarcos como de vidrio molido... (p.549)

It will readily be seen how Asturias juggles with the various elements--cigar (bar), hammock (net,fish), pale blue eyes (fish, powdered glass)--, not only to give unity to the passage, but also to give added force to its expression by varying the presentation of the elements and uniting them to form different images. To suggest intransigence the cigar is conceived as a bar keeping the Colonel's mouth shut; his sly patience and addiction to routine are expressed by the image viewing him in his hammock as though he were a fish swelling a net, a metaphor reinforced by the detail that his eyes are a watery blue and very round in shape; and finally, the coldness suggested by these fish eyes is fused with the information given to him by the adjutant explaining how the dog was killed, and his



eyes are then compared to powdered glass masking thoughts of poisoning Gaspar Ilóm.

This technique creates chains of interweaving images, each of which repeats something that has gone before, but in a slightly different manner, whilst establishing a new nucleus to be expanded further on. This is the process stated in its most mechanical form: obviously it is not always as neat or simple as this. What does need stressing is that Asturias is tying individual paragraphs and pages in the way that most novels tie the whole narrative, by establishing themes which recur, expand and interweave. This is why his novels are so very dense and ornamental, Hombres de maíz even more so than El Señor Presidente, for the weaving is even closer and more carefully patterned. And again we shall see how the whole is built up from and mirrored in each of the parts. Meanwhile the same process can be seen at work in Asturias' treatment of the troopers as he employed with the Colonel. There is less interaction between the elements here--they are merely juxtaposed--because of the static nature of the role the men are to play in this scene.

Cabeceaban en la humedad humosa de sus alientos las bestias ensilladas, con los frenos amarrados en las acciones y la cincha floja. Desde que llegó la montada olía el aire a caballo mojado. (p.543)

Los hombres del coronel Godoy, acurrucados entre las caballerías, se pararon casi al mismo tiempo, espantándose ese como sueño despierto en que caían a fuerza de estar en cuclillas. (p.546)

Los hombres volvieron a caer en su desgana. Sentándose sobre sus talones para seguir horas y horas inmóviles en su sueño despierto. (p.546)

El chucho seguía desatado. Sus ladridos as-  
tillaban el silencio cabeceador de los caballos mechudos y el sueño despierto de los hombres en cuclillas. (p.547)

-Pué dejó de vultear, pué...-dijo uno de los hombres encuclillados entre las caballerías. (p.547)

The repetition here is designed to create a mood in direct contrast to the violent actions of the dog. The men take no active part in the scene, merely commenting on what they see. The dog is given a quite different treatment. It is a mobile element acting in and upon an essentially static ambience, the square and the resting montada. The most noticeable feature of these descriptions is not the use of repetition through variations upon a theme, as it was in the case of the Colonel and his men, but the series of devices used to express the animal's actions. The final effect of the array of images evoking the dog's last minutes is macabre indeed, and is reinforced by the author's open comment:

Parece mentira, pero es a lo más ruin del cuerpo a lo que se agarra la existencia con más fuerza en la desesperada de la muerte, cuando todo se va apagando en ese dolor sin dolor que, como la oscuridad, es la muerte.  
(p.548)

Close examination of the images in this episode reveals a surprising alternation. On the one hand, the suggestion that the dog is impelled towards death by a force both inside and outside itself which is utterly beyond its control: "Y otra vez en carrera, como chorro de agua que el golpe del aire pandea, hasta caer de canto"; "Se lo llevaba el cuerpo"; "al querer dar el primer paso trastabilló como maneado"; "el tatarateo de la agonía, en rápida media vuelta, lo echó al suelo con las patas para arriba". The sordid horror of these images is condensed in the play on words "pegado a la jaula de sus costillas", an early allusion to the theme of man's (or beast's) imprisonment in a material form over which he has no control.

On the other hand, a second group of images creates the suggestion--a false one, of course--that the dog is somehow behaving frivolously or ridiculously, playing almost. One cannot but wonder at Asturias' ability to hold

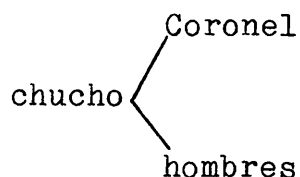
the camera straight at these moments. The images here amount virtually to a succession of jokes at the dying animal's expense, and inevitably make an even deeper impression than did those of the first group: "corría por la plaza como buscaniguas"; "De repente se quedó sin pasos. Rascó la tierra como si hubiera enterrado andares y los buscara ahora que tenía que andar"; "echó a correr husmeando la huella de algún zacate medicinal"; "El chucho sacudía los dientes con tastaseo de matraca"; "El perro pataleaba en el retozo de la agonía".

The combined effect of this alternation is extraordinarily forceful. The oscillation between the idea of deliberate levity and pathetic helplessness reproduces the desperately erratic quality of the animal's swerving run ("el trastorno culebreante de su paso"); but more than this, the terrible innocence of the dog, its inability to understand its predicament, to evade the forces of existence, is an early statement of one of the guiding themes of the novel, and a reason why the Indian philosophy, if such it can be called, is here regarded as so superior to its more sophisticated Western counterpart. This is only one of a succession of episodes foreshadowing the conclusion of the novel, sealed, as we shall see, by the hormigas symbol of the last line.

Although Asturias' novels are not to be termed philosophical, we can see again in Hombres de maíz that the double dimension (particular-general) is so pronounced in every facet of his literary creation that his characters are at all times attended by a sense of infinity. As a poet he evidently holds that the universe is inexplicable, yet still searches for explanations. It would be hard to find a novelist whose narrative style clings more closely or insistently to the realit-

ies clothing the very structure of existence, whose writing refers more directly back from the particularities to the fundamentals of life. This is ultimately what redeems even the most abstruse of Asturias' writings: in the best Hispanic tradition, he never for a moment loses sight of Life behind whatever more limited life he happens to be painting.

So it is here. The reader will not be wholly aware of the technicalities of Asturias' description of the death of the chucho, but he feels its impact, and the impact of its thematic correlation with Gaspar's own divided self--part determining, part determined--as presented in the opening passage. The death is also given a further level of significance, however, which can be traced by returning to the taut visual and emotive triangle drawn within the town square:



Although the dog is to be taken as a symbol, Asturias has not made the mistake of investing it with human thoughts or emotions, but confines himself to expressing the physical manifestations of its suffering. However, apart from the unspoken commentary implicit in the images created to this end, there is a three-part commentary on the dog's last moments, conducted independently by the Colonel, his men, and, as we have seen, the author himself. The men, crude and callous as they may be, feel an instinctive sympathy for the dog, in part because they identify with it.<sup>23</sup> Their pity is modified by the reflection that if the animal is suffering now, life is lonely and long, and its

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23. See the passage from OE I, p.548, quoted on p.187 below.

imminent death will put an end to all the misery. To be killed is not a "castigo", but a "remedio".

When one remembers that the montada has come to massacre Gaspar and his men (which it is soon to do), it is clear just how illogical is the situation. These men are poor devils like the dog, like Gaspar, yet they are in the pay of the government. Once again it must be emphasised how much more effective the realisation of this protest--for that is what it is--becomes for being conveyed by the inner logic of the situation, and not stated explicitly by the text itself.

The reaction of the Colonel is quite different. Firstly, he gives orders to have the matter investigated in case the dog has rabies. Officialdom dehumanises the situation, giving something real the stamp of abstraction (the same effect derives from the repetition of the Colonel's titles: "Coronel del Ejército y Jefe de la Expedicionaria en Campaña"). Secondly, when he discovers that the dog has in fact been poisoned, he begins to hatch a plot for murdering Gaspar in similar fashion. This turns the dog into a more explicit symbol for Gaspar himself, and for the Indians as a whole, in contrast with the troopers' identification with it as a symbol of their own life, and of life in general. The men have failed to see the significance of their mission to kill Gaspar--their alienation--, although they instinctively pity the dog. The Colonel sees the dog's death as a purely objective means to his own ends: he is even further from the essence of life (which resides in the little things as well as the big), and completely fails to see that all life, all death, is of relevance to his own being.

The dual significance of the chucho symbol illustrates the complexity of the role of this passage, as well as of the passage itself, with its brilliantly subtle interplay between action and commentary. The ground is

prepared for Gaspar's death to be generalised, and become part of both the other characters and the reader, because it is related to something other than itself. Its implications are underlined before it takes place, that is to say, Asturias is giving the reader a lens through which to view the event, and is therefore forming a basis on which to build the rest of the novel. The very appearance of the symbol sets up an internal fatalism which means that Gaspar is bound to die.

This analysis has tried to show how each tiny strand of Asturias' narrative is stated, contrasted with others or repeated, and finally linked to some other strand. The passage in question concludes with another typical synthesis, as the Colonel orders the rustic band to play him a tune, so that he can dance with the treacherous Vaca Manuela. Its name, he says, is to be changed to "Santo Remedio":

    Ña Vaca Manuela y el coronel Godoy se sangoloteaban en la oscuridad, al compás de la marimba, como esos fantasmas que salen de los ríos cuando llueve de noche. En la mano de su compañera dejó el Jefe de la Expedicionaria en campaña, un frasquito, santo remedio, dijo, para el jiote de indio. (p.550)

The Colonel's little joke re-emphasises his own callous nature, and refers back to what the men were saying: that death by execution is a "remedy", not a punishment. Godoy evidently has the same idea, but in his case it represents not pity for the human species, but a profound contempt for the Indian race, a canker which he feels should be "cured" with poison. The gradual development of the plot from the first appearance of the dog is instructive. It is a miniature example of Asturias' use of mystery throughout the novel, with the clues always partial and carefully graduated until the final revelation. Gaspar's symbolic

relation to the dog is confirmed in the following manner: (1) The thematic anticipation in the very fact of the dog dying; (2) Godoy takes a curious interest in the nature of the dog's ailment; (3) He discovers that the death is due to poison; (4) He holds a suspicious meeting with Don Tomas and Vaca Manuela; (5) He has the tune renamed "Santo Remedio"; (6) He finally says that the little phial given by him to Vaca Manuela is to cure the jiote de indio.

The short final paragraph just quoted above therefore serves to sew up the entire narrative between pp. 543-50 and leads into the climax of Part I: the death of Gaspar Ilóm. Gaspar is to be exterminated like a dog. His sickness--the rejection of Ladino culture--will be cured like the dog's with poison from the chemist (chemists are always a symbol of Western materialism to Asturias; see Gabriel Santano in Mulata de tal). Certainly this is literatura de protesta, but how much more profound is the protest for being subordinated to the plot in so subtle a manner. It is not expressed in political terms, nor even essentially in social ones. Asturias' fundamental protest is always ultimately against life itself. This does not make the secondary level irrelevant (there is not much we can do about life), but it does make necessary some modification of the slogans usually applied to Asturias' work. What his novels proclaim is that if life is harsh and inexplicable, that is no reason for man to make matters worse by hating and killing his fellows. In this context the Indians, with their emphasis on collective values and their abhorrence of personal ambition, are more truly civilised than most city-dwellers.

Some of the wider differences between the two central passages now under discussion may here be examined. It is noticeable that the Indians almost never speak in the normal sense of the word, for their communion is more with nature than with man. For Gaspar, to think,

feel, smell and touch, merely to be, is to speak. The existence of the things is its voice in creation, everything that it is. During the first third of part I only the land actually speaks. When Gaspar announces to Piojosa that he is setting off for war, he significantly expresses himself in precisely the terms the land used to address him, albeit in a more rustic manner. Piojosa never says a word. Indian sayings, mysterious or ingenuous, are worked into the narrative, but never between inverted commas. They form part of the narrative text, just as everything the Indians say as individuals is part of the collectivity to which they belong.

By contrast, in portraying Ladinos Asturias makes good use of dialogue, and his ear is subtle. The world of difference between the harsh, rather slangy speech of the Colonel and the naively ceremonious responses of the principales del pueblo is brilliantly conveyed. The Ladinos comment on all they see or do, for theirs is a civilisation erected on the concept of individual personality. The Indian speech is their existence itself, the reflection of the many facets of a heritage which all see in the same light.

Gaspar is never presented as an individualised character in the way that Godoy is. Gaspar is a symbol, a representative figure. This is how the Indians see him, not merely how the author has conceived him. It would be overstating the case to say that the Ladinos are profoundly characterised, for this is far from true. It is not Asturias' wish that they should be so. As always his characters are drawn with the bold lines of the theme itself, and they follow its movement closely. Often they seem more profound than perhaps they are, because of this intimate relationship already discussed with reference to El Señor Presidente.



Another comment by Luis Alberto Sánchez will provide a useful means of approach to Asturias' attitude to his characters in Hombres de maíz:

Hay muchos episodios, y episodio patéticos, pero todo ello desaparece ante la importancia obsesionante de la tierra por sí misma, y del estilo apegado al simbolismo trascendental de la existencia, como la carne al hueso... El drama del ciego Gregorio Yic y su mujer María Tecuma (sic), la descripción del "nahualismo", el alemán don Deféric, etc., todo ello es nada, apenas espigas dobladas bajo el vendaval del amor a la tierra, de la fuerza obsesionante del maizal... (24)

As an illustration of the subordination of the characters we can quote another paragraph from the passage we have just been discussing, itself an excellent example of the style of Hombres de maíz:

Sombra de nubes oscuras. Remoto sol. La montaña aceitunada. El cielo, la atmósfera, las casas, todo color de tuna. El que leía el bando, el grupo de vecinos que escuchaba de esquina en esquina--casi siempre el mismo grupo--, los soldados que lo escoltaban con tambor y corneta, no parecían de carne, sino de miltomate, cosas vegetales, comestibles... (p.544)

It describes the scene immediately after the arrival of the montada in Pisigüilito. Sentence of death is pronounced on Gaspar Ilóm and his Indians in hiding up in the mountains. As at other times, the most notable aspect of this impressionistic passage is its sharp perspective, the firm unity with which it is conceived and constructed. The eye moves down from the sky and the mountains in the background to the town and its inhabitants in the foreground. The sky is dark, the clouds heavy, the sun far away. The mountains are an olive

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24. Proceso y contenido de la novela hispanoamericana (Gredos, Madrid 1953), pp.296-7.

colour. Everything is the dark green of the tuna. The repetition of elements of darkness ("sombra de nubes oscuras"; "remoto sol"), a form of emphasis, is matched by the use of todo to seal the insistence on the sombre uniformity of the colour of the landscape.

The scene in the town prompts another short list taking in the reader of the proclamation, the group of listeners and the military escort. (The irony of it always being the same platoon proclaiming the same message to the same listeners is part of Asturias' subtle satire against officialdom: the "bando" itself is a ludicrous mixture of officious jargon and blunt violence). The whole sentence is perfectly balanced, adding impact to the prior ordering of its elements. All is dark, all is gloomy green, and the human beings are likewise affected by the natural phenomenon, and seem to be absorbed by it: "no parecían de carne, sino de miltomate, cosas vegetales, comestibles..." This is a logical classification, which opens out like a fan:

- 1) no parecían de carne
- sino 2) (parecían) de miltomate
- 3) (parecían) cosas vegetales
- 4) (parecían cosas) comestibles

The people seemed not to be creatures of flesh and blood, but "miltomates". The "miltomate" is a small green vegetable (generic classification), and as such edible (qualitative extension). The first three similes are visual, with the third providing a link to the final one. The last adjective, "comestibles", is no longer visual, and might even be intended to refer back to the suggestion of olives in the description of the mountains as "aceitunada". In any case, by using (1) repetition with variation (SOMBRA: nubes--oscuras--remoto sol) to achieve intensity, and (2) enumeration (TODO COLOR DE TUNA: cielo--atmósfera--casas / el que leía el bando--el grupo de vecinos--los

soldados que lo escoltaban) to give an impression of breadth and extension, Asturias makes his paragraph a model of condensation and precision. The culminating image completes the impression of unity.

Two things emerge from this paragraph as regards the characters:

1) Dehumanisation. Human beings are here compared to "miltomates", a simile which would not be cause for comment were it not an example of a highly systematic procedure used throughout this novel. It goes without saying that to liken men to vegetables is an idea perfectly in harmony with one of the themes of the novel. In fact, characters are frequently compared to things that are not human. Goyo Yic's face is "picada de vi-ruelas, reseca y sin expresión, como estiércol de vaca" (p.661). After discovering the disappearance of his wife, Nicho is "caído de hombros, como botella" (p.734). In these cases the similes obviously point to the alienation of the two characters from their natural existence. In other cases, such as the "miltomate" example above, the comparisons tend to harmonise the Indian characters with a world of which they consider themselves an integral, if insignificant part: "Adolescentes con cara de bucul sin pintar jugaban entre los ancianos ..." (p.552); "El compositor con la cara de cáscara de palo viejo, el pelo en la frente pitudo como de punta de mango chupado y las pupilas apenas visibles entre las rendijas de los párpados..." (p.545. Note the suggestiveness of the alliterations here). Whether the comparisons are of this type or, for instance, comparing Godoy as a soldier to a "juguete", they constantly metamorphise human beings into something other than our normal vision of them, and thereby help to prepare us to see this strange world on its own terms, not on ours.

2) Diminution. Thus Asturias is little concerned here with the depiction of individual psychology as such, other than motivations and responses determined by the mores of the collective and natural realities. If the perspective of the paragraph here in question is considered, this view will be reinforced. Its unity derives partly from the visual perspective employed. Like a cine camera, the eye of the writer (and of the novel) pans down methodically from the cloudy sky and the distant mountains to the town. The vantage point is obviously a long distance one in any case, but the final image likening the human beings to vegetables forces the eye to remain at a distance (not to imagine any further), for it implies minuteness, with distance rounding angular human contours into vegetable shapes. The men here are only part of the wide, heavy green vista described, that is to say, we are not viewing it from over their shoulders (still less from inside any of them). The wide perspective is a recurrent feature of Asturias' technique in this novel. It makes the world smaller, more easily manageable (and therefore to some extent explicable), whilst diminishing the size of the characters and integrating them with their natural environment. Man as individual creation comes to seem a very puny and insignificant thing as a result.

## The Mystery of Existence

The present series of analyses are based largely on the belief that Part I of Hombres de maíz is to some extent a microcosm of the novel as a whole, whose elements are later to be expanded and reworked. Its three sections provide brief views first of the Indians and then of the Ladinos, followed by the physical conflict between the two groups and the consequent death of Gaspar Ilóm. The rest of the novel develops the vision of the cultural conflict which precipitated the fatal clash in Part I. By going on to examine some of the salient paragraphs from the beginning of the third and final subdivision of Part I (i.e., chapter 2 in Asturias' notation), we can conclude the first half of our analysis of the novel as a whole.

Los brujos de las luciérnagas, descendientes de los grandes entrechocadores de pedernales, hicieron siembra de luces con chispas en el aire negro de la noche para que no faltaran estrellas guiadoras en el invierno. Los brujos de las luciérnagas con chispas de piedras de rayo. Los brujos de las luciérnagas, los que moraban en tiendas de piel de venada virgen. (p.551)

Asturias' strangely mysterious tone is marked in this passage, created partly by exalted repetition, and partly by the inherent obscurity of the language itself, the absence of referents, and the insistent incantation. In a sense, the mention of estrellas guiadoras is not wholly coincidental, and indeed it provides one more example of the union of form and content in Asturias' work. We need guiding stars at night because we are unable to see in the darkness. In some curious way Asturias has extended this idea to his conception of the novel. The dense obscurity of Parts I to V is reinforced by the fact that most of their scenes take place at night. The various deaths in Parts II to IV are a kind of disappearance into darkness, and this, it should be noticed, is precisely how the In-

dians conceive death ("Lugar de la Desaparición"). The obscurity is mitigated by handfuls of scattered clues which act precisely as guiding stars. This produces the suggestion that life is a sort of journey through the dark (a concept less daunting to the Indians than to us), with only occasional lights to partly illuminate it. The Popol Vuh and the Anales de los xahil represent primitive attempts to explain the origins of the Maya peoples, and refer especially to the creation of man and the birth of fire. Asturias has linked the two ideas to form a symbolism equating life with light (this symbolism is much the same as that of the "Tohil" episode in El Señor Presidente), which is seen at its clearest in the curse of the "brujos de las luciérnagas" (p.562), and he has of course incorporated echoes of the tone and syntax of the old manuscripts. In Hombres de maíz light is a mysterious manifestation of life, and of magic (light is life, and life itself is magic), but here there is not the same simple light-shade alternation which was so important in El Señor Presidente. The light in Hombres de maíz is sporadic, twinkling.

We can return now to the remarks made earlier on the variability of the word used to signify párpados, which was the background to the first paragraph of the novel. Being a general expression for one thing covering another in any sense, literal or metaphorical, it was also the word denoting the brujo figure, because he was a personage who understood the secrets of existence denied to ordinary men. The brujo or curandero is himself shrouded in mystery because he shrouds the mysteries of life. In this novel it is a curandero who shows Nicho the sources of existence, and who finally reveals the true identity of María Tecún. Rather than good and evil, with which light and darkness were associated in El Señor Presidente, they are here used to form a contrast between the dark night of unconsciousness and non-existence, and the glimmering of the forces

of revelation and of life.

The density of Parts I to V is achieved in a variety of ways, some of which have been mentioned, including the rapid switching from character to character and from place to place, and the emphasis on physical sensation and the five senses. In Part IV Godoy's ride to the Tembladero is an astonishing piece of sustained writing, and a perfect example of what we are discussing. There are many others: Asturias' remarkable evocation of Goyo Yic's world suggests what it is like to be blind, and what it is like to see again after being cured (after the initial wonder, Yic's cure is seen not to be a cure at all, and once used to vision he finds that the mysterious world of his imagination was preferable to reality: this is the gist of the contrast between the two halves of the novel); Machojón is converted into a luminaria del cielo; a rampaging forest fire destroys the maiceros; and in Part VI, there is Nicho's journey through the underground caves, and the recreation of Candelaria's sad but wonder-filled life thinking only of the missing Machojón. All these episodes are brilliantly written, for there is nothing that Asturias fears to undertake, and nothing he prefers to a really cataclysmic happening; all take place in an atmosphere of awesome mystery. Another example from chapter II will serve as an illustration:

Mujeres con niños y hombres con mujeres. Claridad y calor de los fogarones. Las mujeres lejos en la claridad y cerca en la sombra. Los hombres cerca en la claridad y lejos en la sombra. Todos en el alboroto de las llamas, en el fuego de los guerreros, fuego de la guerra que hará llorar a las espinas.

Así decían los indios más viejos, con el movimiento senil de sus cabezas bajo las avispas. (p.551)

The flickering bombardment of physical sensations is maintained at a maximum at all significant moments of drama or personal stress. Asturias' style is literally a display of verbal pyrotechnics at these times. His jugglings with words, his experimentation with syntax, imagery and other

formal devices are once more only a reflection of his purpose: they reproduce a world where explicit significance is at a minimum, and where the anarchy of natural phenomena in all their overwhelming multiplicity is anterior to their explanation. Civilised man has gone much farther in cataloguing existence, and will produce an immediate rational explanation for any perceived phenomenon. This places him at a distance from the world of things. Primitive man lives in a far more mysterious world and, most important, truly experiences things: he is living at ground level, as it were. This is why primitive languages tend to have much more precise and comprehensive terms for sensorial phenomena such as effects of light than we have, but a correspondingly poor ability to express abstract ideas as such.

This is also why Asturias showers the novel with physical sensations. Lights (sparks, fires, stars) are given a special importance: this is true of all cultures, for the same obvious reason that to primitive man they seem to need special explanation. But the plurality of twinkling lights is matched by a host of other pluralities, whole galaxies of things which are multiple in themselves, and which parallel Asturias' insistence on the multiplicity of sensations. The conejos amarillos, the maize (stalks, ears, grain) are the same as the brujos de las luciérnagas (fireflies, sparks, multiple lights). The infinite grains of maize are paralleled by the multiple drops of rain which help to create them, and the particles of earth in which they grow. These interlocking chains of pluralities are evident everywhere in the novel, and the section now under examination provides many examples:

...las mujeres se contaban los lunares, risa y risa, o contaban las estrellas.

La que más lunares tenía era la nana de Martín Ilóm, el recién parido hijo del Cacique Gaspar Ilóm. La que más lunares y más piojos tenía. La Piojosa Grande, la nana de Martín Ilóm. (p.552)

The interchanging of "piojos" and "lunares" (not to mention "risas" and "estrellas") prepares the way for Pio-



josa to be revealed as a symbol of the rain (note that Maria Tecun's face is covered in freckles). This emphasises the pantheistic nature of the Indian vision of life by constantly showing things to be multiple, not single, inferring that each man is of no more significance than a drop of water or a blade of grass: only the ocean and the savannah have significance. The European nouveau roman appears at times to have retreated to a similar position; Robbe-Grillet has remarked that the wonder of the world is simply that it exists:

Or le monde n'est ni signifiant, ni absurde.  
Il est, tout simplement. C'est là, en tout  
cas, ce qu'il a de plus remarquable. (25)

Claude Simon's novel L'Herbe, not surprisingly a favourite of Asturias', takes some aspects of Hombres de maíz to their logical conclusion within the European context by writing an extraordinarily beautiful novel whose theme is the inexorable continuity and multiplicity of a universe wholly devoid of ultimate significance.

The difference is that Asturias' novel stresses both significance and multiplicity, for he keeps a tight rein upon his subject matter in order to emphasise that however little the Indian understands life as a whole, he nevertheless imposes a conceptual pattern upon those parts of it that concern him, whilst contenting himself that many other things are beyond his ken, and properly so. One of the greatest deceptions inbuilt into language is that it stereotypes infinite numbers of separate things under more or less determinate numbers of generic names. The multiple elements are life as it is; the generic concepts are the unity imposed upon them by the human mind. Asturias is reminding the reader that every small atom is itself, and is

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25. Pour un nouveau roman (Les Editions de Minuit, Paris 1963), p.18.

unrepeatable though capable of metamorphosis, and with this he returns us to the conflict between time and matter. The use of these background pluralities is confirmed by an important article by Asturias himself, in which he defines tropicalismo in literature as a combination of dazzling light and dazzling metaphors, emphasis on death, eroticism and irreality, and--reading between the lines--transience, pluralism, and a reliance on myths. Asturias is discussing the work of Juan Ramón Molina, an obscure Central American poet, but although he is as generous as ever in considering the work of another writer, what he says tends far more to define Miguel Angel Asturias than the examples he gives of Molina's poetry. For example:

Pero también podría caracterizarse lo tropical en literatura por la presencia de la muerte, no como final del ser, sino como paso del ser a otras sustancias vivas, por lo mismo que en el trópico todo parece quemarse en ardor diurno y nocturno. Millares de insectos nacen cuando se oculta el sol, vibran hasta la aurora y con el primer claror del alba caen como semillas. Plantas y animales, todo se quema en la llama circundante, absoluta, en que la muerte no tiene tiempo para enfriar los cadáveres, porque tibios se transforman en flores. (26)

By contrast with this teeming vision of life, European civilisation has by the very nature of its development needed to impose a certain rational pattern, which in turn has emphasised the concept of human individuality. Asturias' hierarchies of multiple elements hint at the collective nature of humankind, responding to the natural, irrational view of life held by primitive societies. The darkness of the novel is symbolic and suggestive of that part of existence which man must content himself not wholly to understand. Like the sources of poetry, the sources of life are veiled in mystery. And this is their greatest attraction:

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26. "Juan Ramón Molina, poeta gemelo de Rubén", Nueva Revista Cubana, I (Havana, Oct-Dec 1959), no.3, p.47.

El color de las frutas tropicales, rojas, amarillas, verdes, negras, moradas, no es, con todo y su belleza primaria alucinante, lo mejor de la fruta, como en los poetas centroamericanos el ascua del lenguaje, vario y lleno de color, es solo un alarde plástico. Dentro están los jugos, las esencias, la carne en espíritu agonioso de pasar tan ligero por un mundo hecho para ser gozado eternamente, en una semiebriedad de los sentidos, en el duermevela de la luz soñada por grandes lagos, mares, bahías... (27)

The relation of this to Asturias' symbolism should already be evident, and will become even more so in the second half of this chapter. It is astonishing that he could describe someone else's work in these terms, particularly as in this case there seems to be little correspondence between the extracts he quotes from Molina and his commentary upon them. There is obviously a revival here of the Romantic (and, later, Surrealist) belief that there is something beneath the surface of words (see chapter V, Mulata de tal), as there is beneath the surface of life itself. There are mysteries in all the fundamental aspects of our existence: language, sleep, dreams, memory, madness, time, and life and death itself. In each case Asturias adapts authentically Indian culture patterns to his own requirements. He uses the Indian outlook as a vehicle for his own, and uses their linguistic forms and their superstitious belief in the magical power of the word as a basis for his own technique. It is this that forces the novel away from a Romanticism that would ill have fitted it, leaving resignation as the keynote.

A perfect symbol for the creation of an aura of mystery is the envoltorio, or sacred bundle, an example of something (a fetish, as in this case, or a taboo) invested with significance in order to explain some otherwise obscure natural phenomenon. The female organ of the tecuna is described as a magic envoltorio (p.874), and the same kind of idea is pre-

sent in the symbols of the amate, the possum's pouch, Yic's concealment in his own blindness, the "Piedra de María Tecún", and so on. The greatest concealed magic is life and growth, and the flurries of stars and sparks in the night sky of the novel are pointers of this mystery.

We can agree with Luis Alberto Sánchez that everything in the novel is of transcendental significance ("estiloapegado al simbolismo trascendental de la existencia, como la carne al hueso"). The great theme which embraces all the others is the mystery of life, specifically the Indian view of it, seen at close quarters in the first half and discussed mainly from a distance by the characters of the second half. As a theme and a motive this is the basic and proper concern of all art, and the very centre of Asturias' work. Hombres de maíz traces the progress and meaning of legends, which are themselves an attempt to understand life, and as such are the other face of mystery.

In conclusion, perhaps we can risk a final hypothesis which will unite the ideas already expounded on Asturias' careful recreation of the Indian world and the all-pervading note of mystery which goes with it. In La tierra del quetzal, Luis Alberto Sánchez suggests that Asturias' style in Hombres de maíz might be called el estilo maya, though he makes little serious attempt to examine what the features of this style might be. Now there is good reason to argue that the name proposed by Sanchez can be taken literally, for the second half of this study will attempt to show that the structure of Hombres de maíz, both as a whole and in the details already examined in the three sections of the argument so far, may be viewed as a transposition into a literary form of the sculptures and bas-reliefs which were the Central American cultures' foremost artistic achievement. Agustín Yáñez, himself an authority on pre-Columbian culture, informs us that the Aztecs and Mayas expressed themselves almost wholly through plastic forms, and in the process came to view life itself in plastic terms:

El indio es capaz de manifestar por medio de líneas, colores y volúmenes, así las realidades inmediatas, aprehensibles por los sentidos, como los conceptos intelectuales más abstrusos, las creaciones poéticas, los misterios religiosos... La facultad de expresión plástica se manifiesta en la estructura de las lenguas por la fuerza simbólica de los vocablos, cuya morfología concierne pluralismos significativos; y al modo como en las artes visuales los colores tienen un valor metafórico, en las lenguas el cambio de acentos y la introducción de partículas desenvuelven los contenidos de las voces, cuya descomposición etimológica equivale a seguros análisis de expresiones plásticas: véanse, por ejemplos, las riquezas significativas en la etimología de los nombres asignados a las divinidades aztecas, verdaderos jeroglíficos lingüísticos que describen el sentimiento plástico en ellos proyectado. (28)

Alfonso Caso has applied this kind of approach to the famous statue of the goddess Coatlicue in Mexico's National Museum of Anthropology:

The whole figure is an admirable synthesis of the ideas of love and destruction which correspond to the earth. In this piece of sculpture the Indian artist achieved to a supreme degree what in our concept of indigenous art is its enduring characteristic: reality in detail and subjectivity of the whole.

The figure does not represent a being but an idea, yet the parts show an amazing realism. The scales on the bodies of the serpents, the details of the macabre necklace, and the folds of the leather strips which form the back ornament have all been reproduced with a fidelity that can be found only in a people very close to nature. (29)

The relevance of these passages to what has gone before, and particularly to the opening of the novel, will be obvious, and will be seen to apply equally to the overall structure, with the slow creation of a vast allegorical idea from multitudes of tiny patterned fragments. Historically, the style elaborated by the pre-Columbian cultures was in many

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28. A. Yáñez, (Ed.) Mitos indígenas, 3rd ed. (UNAM, Mexico 1964), pp. xvii and xix.

29. A. Caso, The Aztecs: People of the Sun, trans. Lowell Dunham (University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), p. 54.

respects an anticipation of what was to become the characteristic style of the colonia. Alejo Carpentier has the following to say about Latin American style in general:

Nuestro arte siempre fue barroco: desde la espléndida escultura precolombina y el de los códices, hasta la mejor novelística actual de América, pasándose por las catedrales y monasterios de nuestro continente... El legítimo estilo del novelista latinoamericano actual es el barroco. (30)

Again, this applies directly to Asturias, who must be considered a leading example. He himself said something similar in a 1963 interview:

...el barroquismo que nos echan en cara algunos de Europa es por falta de conocimiento de lo que representa el continente americano, tremendamente barroco, contradictorio, desmesurado. (31)

Both these comments appear to stress the aspect of the Baroque as a teeming, densely ornamented style, both in the plastic arts and in literature. Asturias' work is full of fireworks, but he--his organising function--decides exactly when to let them off. Perhaps the most commonly accepted definition of the Baroque style in sculpture is that it confines a maximum of ornate detail within a carefully defined minimum of space. Another revealing extract from Asturias' essay on Juan Ramón Molina proves that he is conscious of this. He cites the 18th-century poet Rafael Landívar as "la prueba de que lo tropical no es desbordamiento de palabras, sino movimiento de recreación de ese mundo con precisa geometría..." That is, the multiple swelling of tropical Central American reality can only be restrained artistically through a tightly ordered literary pattern. It suggests the rigid stylisation which can be seen on the pre-Columbian bas-reliefs, and their successors in Spanish American Bar-

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30. A.Carpentier, Tientos y diferencias (UNAM, Mexico City 1964), p.43.

31. J.Corrales Egea, "Miguel Angel Asturias", Insula, no. 197 (Madrid, April 1963), p.12.

oque design.<sup>32</sup> It is at its clearest in Hombres de maíz in the opening paragraphs. The careful design in that part of the novel is slowly diluted into the swirling patterns of the later parts, which form a broader structure and themselves reflect the disintegration of the Indian vision in its pure form, as it unites with the new cultural force to form something different from either. Then, as the meaning of the novel--and life--becomes clear, the symmetry returns in the final affirmation by the Curandero; as a Maya stone image is seemingly carved out and erected before us, from reality through concepts to composite abstraction, his cry halts the passage of time itself:

-¡María la Lluvia, la Piojosa Grande, la que echó a correr como agua que se despeña, huyendo de la muerte, la noche del último festín en el campamento del Gaspar Ilóm! Llevaba a su espalda al hijo del invencible Gaspar y fue paralizada allí donde está, entre el cielo, la tierra y el vacío! ¡María la Lluvia, es la Lluvia! ¡La Piojosa Grande es la Lluvia! A sus espaldas de mujer de cuerpo de aire, de solo aire, y de pelo, mucho pelo, solo pelo, llevaba a su hijo, hijo también del Gaspar Ilóm, el hombre de Ilóm, llevaba a su hijo el maíz, el maíz del Ilóm, y erguida estará en el tiempo que está por venir, entre el cielo, la tierra y el vacío. (p.922)

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32. Yáñez, p.xx, quotes Alfonso Caso: "característica constante del arte mexicano es la de transformar cada motivo en un motivo de decoración; el arte mexicano es un arte decorativo cuyo modo de expresión fundamental es la repetición rítmica. De ahí la necesidad de simetría y, también, el deseo de cubrir con decoración todo el espacio posible, sin dejar grandes superficies lisas." Yáñez continues: "por lo que hace a las lenguas, todavía podemos percibir la importancia que en ellas tienen los elementos ornamentales: adjetivos, epítetos, imágenes, metáforas, y el ritmo prosódico desenvuelto en agradable simetría."

## 2. THE LITERARY EDIFICE

The whole structure of Hombres de maíz is devised to thread all the different passages together in the way examined so as to produce a series of thematic syntheses converging towards the end of the novel. This has not prevented the majority of those critics who have looked at the work from condemning it outright on the grounds that there is so little structural cohesion that it can scarcely be called a novel. Enrique Anderson Imbert regards it as a poorly conceived collection of short stories:

Hombres de maíz son relatos en que se estructuran elementos legendarios y reales, contrapunto a veces destemplado porque el autor no se aclaró ante sí mismo su objeto artístico. (33)

Joseph Sommers, in a generally favourable article, comments:

Its structural form at times is completely hidden, and the reader is hard put to grasp the relationship between parts. (34)

Seymour Menton makes what is certainly the most detailed structural analysis so far and reaches similar conclusions:

A pesar del intento del autor de fundir todas las tramas individuales, a esta novela le falta la gran unidad de El Señor Presidente. La culpa no está en la ejecución sino en la concepción de la obra. Asturias intenta romper con el concepto tradicional de la novela. No hay protagonistas de toda la novela. No hay conflictos que queden por resolver. No hay desarrollo de acción. (35)

The verdict would carry more weight if Menton's analysis had limited its discussion of the story of the novel and concentrated more on thematic considerations. In the event he

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33. Historia de la literatura hispanoamericana, II, 4th ed. (FCE, Mexico 1964), p.226.
  34. "The Indian-Oriented Novel in Latin America: New Spirit, New Forms, New Scope", Journal of Inter-American Studies, VI (April 1964), p.253.
  35. Historia crítica de la novela guatemalteca, pp.221-222.



fails to make even one suggestion of what Asturias' motives in writing this work may have been. To condemn a novel on structural grounds from an analysis confined to its plot is surely the most elementary of mistakes. To suggest, moreover, that it is a failure simply because it does not conform to traditional criteria is to ignore the evidence of the whole course of twentieth-century literature, as well as the truism that unusual subject matter of necessity requires new formal procedures.

Hombres de maíz falls into six parts, each of which takes its title from the name of one of the characters. If we include the brief Epilogue these six parts divide into twenty chapters. The first five parts (twelve chapters) are together almost exactly as long as the last part.

			number of pages		
I	(2 chaps.)	"GASPAR ILÓM"	24	120	192
II	(3 chaps.)	"MACHOJÓN"	31		
III	(2 chaps.)	"VENADO DE LAS SIETE-ROZAS"	26		
IV	(2 chaps.)	"CORONEL CHALO GODOY"	39	72	196
V	(3 chaps.)	"MARIA TECÚN"	72		
VI	(8 chaps.)	"CORREO-COYOTE"	196	196	196

This gives the novel a somewhat unusual shape, which needs careful examination.

## Part I Gaspar Ilóm

Part I covers twenty-four pages, divided sixteen and eight between two chapters. In fact, the first of these two chapters itself divides naturally into two equal parts. Thus we have three exactly equal sections.

In the first of these Gaspar Ilóm, the Indian cacique of the region of Ilóm, undergoes a struggle with his own conscience (conceived as the lament of the land) over whether or not he should combat the invading commercial maize-growers. In this, the most hermetically Indian section of

the whole novel, Gaspar decides to defend his heritage, the land. The subsequent sexual act with his reluctant woman, La Piojosa Grande, is a symbol of his determination to maintain the race. He begins to gun down maicer-  
os at random, and government troops are sent to relieve the little town of Pisigüilito, the maicero base.

The second section deals, as we have seen, with the government montada, and its leader, Colonel Godoy. The spectacle of the agonised death of a poisoned dog suggests a means of eliminating Gaspar Ilóm, and thereby suppressing the leaderless Indians. Godoy enlists the aid of Don Tomás Machojón, formerly a member of Gaspar's community, whose wife, Vaca Manuela, is a Ladina.

The third section (chapter two) returns us to the mountains of Ilóm, where the Indians are greeting the summer with a ceremonial feast. Vaca Manuela slips poison into Gaspar's drink, whereupon La Piojosa Grande, having had a premonitory dream about her husband's fate, flees with her baby son, but is overtaken by Gaspar. She escapes death only through Gaspar's fear of harming the child. Gaspar pauses to drink the liquor and Piojosa flees off again into the night. Gaspar spends the next hours cleansing his intestines of the poison, but all his men are killed and he drowns himself.

The whole of Part I is superlatively well written, and its construction--the presentation of the Indian leader and his relationship to the threatened land; the arrival of the enemy force and the preparation of the betrayal; and finally, the clash and the death of the Indian--is perfect in the interdependence of its parts, each of which has its own internal structure. The climax of the whole is Gaspar's triumph over death and subsequent suicide. From an initial presentation as a very human figure dominated by a timeless association with a mythical conception of reality, he moves to the position of a mythical figure viewed necessarily against a background of normal outward reality:

Vivo, alto, la cara de barro limón, el pelo de nige lustroso, los dientes de coco granudos, blancos, la camisa y calzón pegados al cuerpo, destilando mazorcas líquidas de lluvia lodosa, algas y hojas, apareció con el alba el Gaspar Ilóm, superior a la muerte, superior al veneno... (p.558)

Despite assertions by various critics that each of the six parts could very well have stood alone, Part I is in fact the only one which could possibly have done so (and even here there is a clear need for a sequel revealing the response of the land to the outrages wrought against it). To argue otherwise is to ignore the overwhelming textual evidence that the continuity given to life by legends is one of the principal themes of this novel, and that legends are one of its most important sources of unity: the keynote of the whole is the contrast between the temporality of the individual life and the continuity of the collective life.

## Part II Machojón

Part II breaks the narrative line (though not the thematic correlation) effectively terminated in Part I, and follows the course taken by the revenge of the land. Machojón, the son of one of Gaspar's betrayers, Don Tomás Machojón, disappears on his way to claim the hand of his novia (chap.3). This fulfils part of the prophecy implicit in the curse of the Brujos de las Luciérnagas to the effect that all the descendants of the betrayers of Gaspar Ilóm would be sterile.

Machojón's prometida, Candelaria Reinoso, is left to mourn him, in company with his father, Don Tomás, and step-mother Vaca Manuela (chap.4).

A legend is cultivated that Machojón's spirit can be seen riding out in the forest fires lighted to clear the land for maize-planting, and the grief-stricken Don Tomás eventually burns himself, Vaca Manuela and all the maiceros in the area to death by setting the forest alight and riding

out to search for his lost son (chap.5).

### Part III    Venado de las Siete-Rozas

Part III falls into two sections. In the first of these (chap.6) the revenge of the land is carried a stage further through the murder<sup>of</sup> one group of Indians, the Zacatones, by another group, the Tecunes, after a curandero has revealed that the Zacatones bewitched the aging Nana Tecún by magically inducing a cricket into her belly.<sup>36</sup>

In the second section (chap.7) we discover that one of the Tecunes, Calistro, has lost his sanity as a result of drinking a potion to find out who was responsible for the embruajamiento. The Curandero declares that to cure Calistro they must now shoot down the stag called the Venado de las Siete-Rozas in order to mesmerise the madman with its eye. In the event the deer turns out to be the nahual (animal protector) of the Curandero himself, for Gaudencio Tecún shoots the deer at exactly the same moment as Calistro murders the Curandero. On this mysterious note Part III ends.

### Part IV    El Coronel Chalo Godoy

Part IV completes the vengeance of the land, with the Colonel riding through the night to his eventual doom, accompanied by the comical Secundino Musús (chap.8). They are trying to overtake the rest of the patrol. When they finally do so, they meet an Indian on his way to the Tecunes' rancho carrying a coffin for the Curandero who died in chapter seven.

Musus is sent to ascertain that the Indian is not part of an ambush, and meanwhile Godoy and the rest of the mon-

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36. An early version of this episode may be found in El Imparcial (Guatemala City) for 15 August 1931, p.5, entitled "En la tiniebla del cañaveral". Although published 18 years before the novel this story is almost identical to the relevant section as it appeared in 1949.

tada are trapped in a circle of fire and massacred (chap. 9).

## Part V    María Tecún

Part V is wholly concerned with the wanderings of a blind man called Goyo Yic, who is deserted by his wife Maria Tecún (formerly Zacatón), whom Yic rescued as a baby from the aftermath of the murder of her family (chap.10).

Yic is cured of his blindness by Chigüichón Culebro, an Indian surgeon (chap.11), and sets off in search of María Tecún, first as a pedlar (chap.12), then as a liquor dealer, and is finally thrown into an island prison off the Atlantic coast on a false charge of smuggling.

We are now in a position to begin a closer examination of the novel's structure. Part I is set at the beginning of this century and shows the indissoluble relationship between the Indians and the land. The concept that men are made of maize is itself merely an expression of that relationship, and the treachery which destroys it is its natural converse; Tomás Machojón's move from the monte to Pisigüilito at the behest of his Ladino wife is a logical precedent for his betrayal of Gaspar and the whole Indian heritage.

A second theme lies in the establishment of the equivocal relationship between male and female, with the woman conceived as a mysterious being forever fleeing from the male, and by extension symbolising absence, longing, all that is out of human reach. In so far as the man represents the land and its products, and the woman the rain and the heavens from which it falls, the land is equated with reality and the rain with the unreal. This polarity emphasises that human existence is spent tied to certain concrete realities while straining towards others more dimly perceived. It seems likely that the insistence with which Asturias returns to this theme--a central one in modern literature--in Hombres de maíz corresponds to an influence from the Popol

Vuh, namely the extract following the creation of man where the gods, irritated at man's presumptuous claims to the understanding of his condition, blow mist into his eyes to cloud them as a mirror.<sup>37</sup> This destroys all possibility of true wisdom and knowledge, leaving the human race to pursue its true function: procreation.

However, man continues to yearn for enlightenment even after the deprivation of his wisdom, and the spirit continues to be attracted by what we term the unreal. Asturias' interest in legends is just one more aspect of his preoccupation with the nature of reality and its inverse.

The next three parts (II, III and IV) show the deaths of Gaspar's betrayers within the seven years following his defeat at the hands of the montada. Asturias presents each stage of the inexorable revenge of the land in terms of the myth woven around it in retrospect--that is, from the Indian point of view--and it is not at first clear what happens in each case. On the very first page of the novel we heard the chant of the land urging that Gaspar should "trozar los párpados a los que hachan los árboles, quemar las pestañas a los que chamuscan el monte", and this is later fulfilled by the action of these three parts. The murder of Gaspar was itself a symbol of the destruction of the land.

Machojón really dies in a forest fire, as do his father and stepmother; the Zacatones (relatives of the chemist who provided the poison to murder Gaspar) are decapitated; and Colonel Godoy and the patrol are ambushed by the Indians. All these things take place in darkness. Whether the betrayers die through human or natural agencies in each case, the Indians regard the deaths as clear evidence that the land has taken its revenge, and Asturias fashions the inci-

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37. See Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Ancient Maya Quiche, an English version of Adrián Recinos' translation into Spanish by Delia Goetz and Sylvanus G. Morley (London, 1951), p.169.

dents accordingly. Only later do certain clues reveal what really happened.

Part V is set some time after the first quarter of this century, to judge from details of when María Tecún was born, and the large number of children she has. The time notation is one of many aspects about which Asturias is deliberately vague. He wishes the reader to be aware that time is passing, without specifying how much, for one of the necessary qualities of a legend (if it is to be believed) is that it should as far as possible be timeless. This section is entitled "Maria Tecun", though she appears only for a very brief period at the beginning. At this point the reader sees her as a creature of flesh and blood, deserting her husband because he has kept her almost perpetually pregnant ever since she reached marriageable age.

Yic does not meet her again in this part, but undertakes a country-wide search which begins to create a legend about her name. The title emphasises that the theme of this phase of the novel is the absence of the loved object or, rather, the longing of the deserted husband, for the longing almost becomes Yic's whole being. The introduction of this theme returns us to the flight of La Píjosa Grande in Part I and as such is a logical corollary to the loss of the telluric heritage. The symbolism of the Indian--blind and therefore truly able to see with his own inner being--is fairly obvious, though never overtly expressed by the author. Once Yic receives his sight (a symbol of the transition from primitive pantheism to Western rationalist awareness), his life changes for the worse. He wanders off in search of the female as if after a mirage, leaves the land behind, and goes into small-time business, which turns out disastrously. The implications of Yic's blindness are given extra dimensions by references to the tacuatzín (opossum), which keeps its young in a pouch, and to the amate (Mexican fig-tree), whose fruit--true identity

--is likewise hidden away out of sight, just as the blind man lives only within the complex of thoughts and nonvisual sensations of his own mind. Once his sight is restored, the search for María Tecún and their children creates a sense of time passing which is one of the central themes of the novel.

At this point, then, we can see that the two themes to emerge from Part I--the land and the passage of time (absence theme)--have been continued separately and in different directions, the former in Parts II, III and IV, with the revenge of the Brujos de las Luciérnagas, and the latter in Part V by the flight of María Tecún.

#### Part VI    Correo-Coyote

Part VI accounts for half the novel and is the pool into which all these earlier currents flow (see p.142 above). Its internal structure is more complex than that of the earlier parts, whose themes it will eventually synthesise. The story of María Tecún has by this stage given rise to the term tecuna to describe any runaway wife, while a huge rock high in the mountains, which popular legend has it tempts abandoned husbands to their doom, has been named the "Piedra de María Tecún".<sup>38</sup> The protagonist of the second half of the novel is Nicho Aquino, an Indian postman whose job it is to carry the mail on foot from San Miguel Acatán to the Capital and back. Nicho's wife is not at home when he arrives one evening (chap.13), and he is forced to believe that she too is a tecuna. The whole of this long sixth part is taken up with his search for her--which parallels that of Goyo Yic for María Tecún--and with the search subsequently undertaken by a muleteer called Hilario Sacayón, when Nicho himself is discovered to be missing.

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38. Asturias has informed me that the story of María Tecún is based on that of a maid in the service of his family who stayed indoors for three years to evade her husband. The "Piedra de María Tecún" also exists in fact.



Immediately following the disappearance of his wife, Nicho gets drunk to drown his sorrow. Hilario is drinking in the same bar in one lengthy scene, but from this moment onwards the two men never appear "on-stage" together, and in fact they never meet again, though each comes into contact with a number of other people. Asturias alternates narrative agents along the following pattern:

chap. 13 - Nicho and Hilario  
14 - Hilario  
15 - Nicho  
16 - Hilario  
17 - Hilario  
18 - Nicho  
19 - Nicho

The mosaic of chance meetings (and failures to meet) which Asturias constructs in this part of the novel is not primarily a weak attempt at giving continuity to a disorganised narrative, as Menton suggests, but rather a series of incidents or situations which underline the haphazard nature of human life and of the fates which determine its course, especially for the isolated individual. There is a startling moment later in the novel when Yic, a character whom the reader knows well, sees a tiny spot down on the ocean and speculates on what it might be. It turns out to be the boat of Nicho, another character whose course has been closely followed by the reader. But Goyo remains unaware that the spot is Nicho (whose experience has been so like his own); and Nicho never knows that anyone was looking down at him. This kind of detail characterises much of Asturias' work and is reminiscent, for example, of that similar moment in Joyce's Ulysses where Bloom and Dedalus finally meet towards the end of the novel, having just missed one another all day.

Three weeks after the scene in the bar Nicho sets off for the Capital again (chap.15), but meets an old man who takes him off on an underground pilgrimage to discover the truth about his wife's disappearance. Hilario is sent after Nicho to escort him past the Cumbre de María Tecún,

but rides all the way to the Capital and back without finding him.

A long section (chaps.16 and 17) is devoted to Hilario's journey. It is his role to link a string of episodes and characters, while he himself undergoes a powerful personal experience. He has always ridiculed local suspicions that Nicho has a coyote double (this because he delivers the mail so quickly). However, towards the end of his journey he sees a coyote with Nicho's eyes somehow staring from its face ("Tuvo la impresión de que era gente y gente conocida"). At this point his role is finished:

Dueño de una verdad oculta, callaba, callaba y en sus ojos, al dormirse, juntábase la imagen del correo desaparecido, del que en San Miguel no se tuvo más noticia, con el sueño que era una especie de coyote suave, de coyote flúido, de coyote oscuridad, en cuya sombra se perdían en cuatro patas, los dos pies del correo. (pp.870-1)

Hilario is thus a largely functional character, with the camino real as the direction of his trajectory through the novel.<sup>39</sup> There is no suggestion that his role is finished at the end of chapter 17, but he disappears from the novel and is not mentioned again. The point at which we leave him is highly significant (cf Cara de Angel's vision of Tohil), for it occurs at precisely the moment where, after acting in a noisily sceptical fashion, he at last becomes convinced of the truth of Nicho's double identity as both man and coyote. One of the main reasons for Hilario's scepticism is that he himself invented a spurious legend which was given wide currency in San Miguel, concerning the love of an Irish pedlar called O'Neil, whom he met as a child, for a beautiful dark-haired girl from San Miguel

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39. The importance of the camino as a symbol in Hispanic literature needs no stressing. The Quixote is in fact mentioned twice in Hombres de maíz, where the road is equated with Western individualism and the land with collective consciousness.

called Miguelita, whose sewing machine was supposed to be heard every evening at midnight. As far as Hilario is concerned Miguelita never existed. But one evening when his German employer, Don Deféric, is discussing the legend with his wife, Doña Elda, the sewing machine is suddenly heard in operation and the legend has come true.

The same couple also discuss regional superstitions with Father Valentín, the priest of San Miguel, who is himself an authority on Indian customs and beliefs such as nahualismo. Father Valentín, who is no doubt a modern reconstruction of church chroniclers such as Sahagún and Landa at the time of the Conquest, decides that Nicho's wife must be suffering from a malady known as laberinto de araña, caused by a powder that only witch-doctors know how to compound. Its result is that women run away from home, the husbands chase them, arrive at the Cumbre de María Tecún, and throw themselves over the precipice, thinking the rock to be their wives calling them to come. It is this diagnosis which induces Don Deféric to send Hilario after Nicho, to protect him from the legend.

Doña Elda is contemptuous of such talk, accusing the priest and her husband of weak-mindedly helping to feed "el monstruo de la poesía popular". But Deféric retorts that legends have their own life, which is the product of the interplay between the popular imagination and the basic human drives, but which in the end becomes a powerful force reacting back upon them. To discount the force and meaning of legends is to be a materialist:

...esa manera de pensar era absolutamente materialista y el materialismo es absurdo, porque lo material no es nada más que la materia en una forma pasajera. (p.782)

Don Deféric is swiftly vindicated by the sound of the imaginary Miguelita sewing at her machine. Asturias is not of course insisting that all these things are in fact literally verifiable realities. Almost all the legends in the novel

are without factual basis. He seeks to suggest the susceptibility of human imagination to the allusiveness of perceived phenomena in given circumstances; and to hint at the internal meaning of legends.

Once Miguelita's existence has apparently been proved to be independent of Hilario's imagination, the narrative switches quickly back to his pursuit of the missing postman and his own road to enlightenment. In passing through the village of Tres Aguas he meets Ña Moncha, an old bruja who has her own theories about legends. Ña Moncha declares that she heard about the Miguelita legend years before Hilario was born:

Cuando uno cuenta lo que ya no se cuenta, dice uno, yo lo inventé, es mío, esto es mío. Pero lo que uno efectivamente está haciendo es recordar, vos recordaste en tu borrachera lo que la memoria de tus antepasados dejó en tu sangre, porque tomá en cuenta que formás parte no de Hilario Sacayón solamente, sino de todos los Sacayón que ha habido... (p.791)

This recalls something said earlier by Gaudencio Tecún in Part III:

Allá lejos me acuerdo... Yo no había nacido, mis padres no habían nacido, mis abuelos no habían nacido, pero me acuerdo de todo lo que pasó cuando me lavo la cara con agua llovida.

(pp.611-612)

Both these extracts express more or less openly the sense of continuity with the past and of participation in a collective reality which is so subtly suggested throughout the novel. The reference to "agua llovida" is an early anticipation of the themes immanent in the story of María Tecún and in Nicho Aquino's search. We shall shortly be discussing its relevance to the conclusion of the novel. Ña Moncha comments that Hilario is too sceptical and cocksure. Indians are normally notable for their humility before the spectacle of existence:

Para creer se necesita ser humilde. Y sólo las cosas humildes crecen y perduran; vélo en el monte. (p.789)

She concludes that legends flow through the generations, accumulating new material as they go.<sup>40</sup> They can never dry up completely:

Su existencia, ficticia o real, forma parte de la vida, de la naturaleza de estos lugares, y la vida no puede perderse, es un riesgo eterno, pero eternamente no se pierde. (p.792)

This of course returns us in the first instance to one of Asturias' fundamental concepts: that reality is what men believe, not what is scientifically demonstrable; and secondly, it renews the idea that although individual beings are constantly dying, mankind as a whole lives on, with legends uniting all who have lived as part of the language of the generations.

After this lesson in the theory of Indian legendry, Hilario continues his search for Nicho. Following his brief glimpse of the Nicho-like coyote, his failure to find the missing postman convinces him on a practical level that the superstition was based on fact, and this realisation marks the end of Hilario's journey through the novel. The ride to the Capital and back takes in a variety of personalities, each of whom adds something to the growing awareness of an individual--Hilario--in whom the reader can see in action the multiple effect of the myths and folk tales handed down through the collective tradition. Characters like Ña Moncha, Candelaria Reinoso, Benito Ramos, Don Casualidón, and others, all contribute their own considered opinions on life's experience, thereby constructing the spectacle of an infinite collective reality which each human being must view from his own tiny angle. Wisdom is equated with sadness in

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40. In Santa Eulalia: The Religion of a Cuchumatán Indian Town (University of Chicago Press, 1947), Oliver LaFarge comments that the legends of the region are not fixed tales but "an enormous reservoir of mythical and legendary material, from which the narrator draws up that group of incidents and details which suits his purpose", with the result that the "untold 'ideal' story receives new additions, from which others, in turn, will draw." (p.48)

each case, perhaps precisely because the conclusions are individual ones. In the course of Hilario's journey, all echo the sentiments expressed far more briefly by the soldiers of the montada, as they watched the poisoned dog dying back in Part I:

-Entuavía se medio mueve. ¡Cuesta que se acabe el ajigolón de la vida! ¡Bueno Dios nos hizo perecederos sin más cuentos... pa que nos hubiera hecho eternos! De sólo pensarlo me basquea el sentido.

-Por eso digo yo que no es pior castigo el que le afusilen a uno--adujo el del chajazo en la ceja.

-No es castigo, es remedio. Castigo sería que lo pudieran dejar a uno vivo para toda la vida, pa muestra...

-Esa sería pura condenación. (p.548)

These are all people who in one way or another have either lost contact with the Indian heritage or, as in the case of Don Casualidón the Spaniard, are not Indians at all. Their sadness has become irremediable since the loss of the simple innocence which characterises primitive races, and affords them satisfaction in the fulfilment of purely natural functions.

Hilario, then, departs from the novel at the point where he too is profoundly affected by a realisation of life's insoluble mystery (for this is what his recognition of Nicho's double identity amounts to). The opening of chapter 18 takes us from Hilario's imagined vision of Nicho somehow metamorphosing into a coyote to the accomplished fact; the novelist achieves a startling effect by slyly expressing the obviously human feelings of some unspecified creature which we slowly come to realise is in fact a coyote. Thus begins the Correo-Coyote's underground journey with the old Curandero as his guide. The Curandero turns out to be the same one who was apparently killed in Part III, that is to say, his nahual is the Venado de las Siete-Rozas.

The Underground Caves hidden away in the mountains

are where men go finally to meet their nahual, or other self, which during the period of their sojourn in the unreal world below the earth separates itself from their identity and faces them.<sup>41</sup> One assumes that the other self represents the true nature of the human creature, those aspects which link him to the land and the past:

La vida más allá de los cerros que se juntan es tan real como cualquier otra vida. No son muchos, sin embargo, los que han logrado ir más allá de la niebla subterránea... Y los que han logrado ir más allá de la niebla subterránea, al volver cuentan que no han visto nada, callan cohibidos dejando entender que saben los secretos del mundo que está oculto bajo los cerros.  
(p.885)

Very few men get the chance to know what they and life itself really are. Those who do become inward-looking, taciturn. This was the fate of Hilario and it is to become the fate of Nicho, though of course where Hilario and those he

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41. Plato's Republic (Book VII) presents an inverse parallel. The "Simile of the Cave" is concerned with the spiritual illumination of those few happy souls who escape from the darkness of unconscious ignorance. Though the episode in Hombres de maíz is clearly based on the Mayan underworld of Xibalbá, it seems likely that part of Asturias' intention was precisely to oppose the exaggeratedly rationalistic culture we have inherited from the civilisations of antiquity. Even more important in this respect is the possible influence of Jung (cf chapter III above). Can there be any doubt that Nicho, in descending to the caves, is descending for a moment to the collective unconscious (see also descriptions of the tecuna's female organ); or that the views on legends attributed to Don Deféric and Ña Moncha are based on Jung's conception of archetypal symbols? The same foundation can be seen in the joint identity of María Tecún and Píojosa. Much of Jung's theory revolves around the concept of differentiation, the moment when man learns to view himself as an individual separate from the tribe: the relevance of this to Hombres de maíz is obvious enough. We see again the striking correlation between Jung's thought and the thematic conception of El Señor Presidente and Hombres de maíz. I do not know if Asturias is familiar with Jung's conclusions, but it seems highly likely.

met on his way drew their conclusions from the external standpoint we all share, Nicho is privileged by his grief to descend to the deepest sources of life for enlightenment. Logically, the truths revealed to him by the Curandero are a conscious expression (and, ultimately, a synthesis) of the themes which have determined the narrative's course thus far. (The Indian curandero is tailor-made for the role of visionary, the man who knows life's secrets, just as the phenomenon of nahualismo is the ideal vehicle for Asturias' investigations into the nature of reality and identity.)

The establishment of Nicho's double identity, following as it does Hilario's long movement towards a kind of reconciliation with the process of legend formation, completes the first stage of the fusion of myth and reality. Hilario's journey was on the real plane, where legends are invented, discussed, and finally accepted almost on trust. Nicho's journey is on a plane where the very substance of popular mythology has a concrete existence. Appearing simultaneously as man and coyote, he carries the narrative forward on this double plane towards the transcendental conclusion. The explanation of the events of the early parts and of the disappearance of his wife amount quite simply to Nicho's beginning--though only beginning--to discover the meaning of life. Hence the Curandero's cry:

¡Te falta mucho para zahorí, coyote de la loma  
de los coyotes! Mucho que andar, mucho que oír,  
mucho que ver. (p.920)

What he is saying is that a man finally becomes a "seer" at the moment of death. Only then, when we can contemplate all of life, do we understand what life has been. Nicho is presented initially as a pathetic and ingenuous character who carries the mail from San Miguel to the Capital "con devoción de perro". He is a muñeco, a man who has become his role in life (cf Canales in El Señor Presidente), with a corresponding loss in fundamental human content. When his wife



dies, Nicho commences on the long uphill path to death, for woman is the essence of transient illusion. While he believes her alive he is prepared to search endlessly, and the search itself is the reason for living. When he finds out that she is dead, the heart goes out of him. The Curandero begins his education by taking him to see the rain-clouds forming over the ocean:

Se movieron hacia el Oeste para asomar a un ventanal inmenso, abierto en la negrura de las peñas, y contemplar desde allí al vacío azul, lechoso, de la bruma que subía del mar. Nube-cillas con patas de araña paseaban al soplo del viento por el polvo luminoso de la luz solar, polvo que se mezclaría al agua para que el agua fuera clara, potable, llorosa. Llorosa conductora de nostalgias es el agua llovida. Los que la beben, hombres y mujeres, sueñan con verdes que no vieron, viajes que no hicieron, paraísos que tuvieron y perdieron. El verdadero hombre, la verdadera mujer que hay, es decir que hubo en cada hombre y en cada mujer, se ausentaron para siempre, y sólo queda de ellos lo exterior, el muñeco, los muñecos con deberes de gente sedentaria. El deber del correo, como muñeco, es defender la correspondencia con la vida, para eso lleva el machete, y entregarla a buen seguro; sólo que el muñeco se acaba, el deber del muñeco, cuando bajo la cáscara aparecía lo amargamente humano, lo instintivamente animal.  
(pp.879-80)

This is the first of a series of important extracts which must be examined. Hombres de maíz is largely composed of the kinds of lyrical prose poems analysed in the first half of this chapter, and it has not been recognised that the principal themes of the novel are to be found in almost every one of them; if they are approached as poems are approached. We see here Asturias' conception of the human spirit, ever ready to escape from the matter which surrounds it in search of illusion and the unattainable. Elsewhere, when Hilario is wondering whether or not to try courting a beautiful girl he passes on the road, Asturias writes:

Sin esfuerzo, mientras pasaban los árboles,  
los cercos de piedras, los llanos, las peñas,

los trechos de ríos, Sacayón veía como sobre-  
puesta en el aire la carita graciosa de la  
fanchera. Sobre todas las cosas que iban con  
él, a la par suya, por donde tirara los ojos  
aparecía ella. Es tan dada el alma a lo que  
el cuerpo quiere, cuando hay juventud. Al  
revés de los viejos. En los viejos el cuerpo  
es el inclinado a lo que el alma quiere, y el  
alma, pasados los años, ya va queriendo volar.  
(pp.835-36)

The simple beauty of this subtly balanced passage is typical of Asturias' style in this novel, almost all of which is written, as here, preponderantly in the popular idiom and, as far as possible, using popular syntax. Behind all these extracts lies a conception of life which is almost commonplace in its simplicity. The human race exists for ever as a collectivity, but each individual must undergo the cycle through birth and reproduction to death. Man is part matter and part spirit, and the two elements of his being are in constant conflict, the more so as rational consciousness increases in the individual. Each man learns about life from the experience of his own life, while the collective need--through his instincts--induces him to have children. And though he is not at first aware of it, children are his only means to immortality. Benito Ramos, childless and living out a painful old age, comments:

...todo eso del amor es babosada de gana de tener hijos... siempre acaba uno arrepentido, la vejez es un arrepentimiento tardío: le vaya a uno bien o le vaya mal, después de pasado el tiempo siempre tiene uno la impresión de que ha perdido el vivir en el vivir mismo... Para eso sirven los hijos... sólo los hijos dan la ilusión del patacho que sigue adelante, con el mejor que no se los puede uno comer ni venderlos, quedan... (pp.832-33)

The spirit is always straining away from the body, just as Piojosa and María Tecún flee from sexual contact with their husbands, but the body seeks to reproduce itself. For the body, too, proves to be transient. It is not time that passes, but life itself:

-¡Hermano del correo es el horizonte del mar cuando se pierde al infinito para entregar la correspondencia de los periquitos y las flores campestres a los luceros y las nubes! ¡Hermanos del correo, los bólidos que llevan y traen la correspondencia de las estrellas, madrinas de las "tecunas" y "tecunas" también ellas mismas, porque después de beber espacios con andadito de nube, se van, desaparecen, se pierden como estrellas fugaces! ¡Hermanos del correo los vientos que traen y llevan la misiva de las estaciones! ¡La estación de la miel, Primavera; la estación de la sal, Verano; la estación de los peces, Invierno; y el Otoño, la estación de la tierra que cuenta los muertos del año en el camposanto: uno, dos, tres, diez, cien, mil, aquí, allá, más allá, y tantos y tantos otros en otros lugares! La carne tiene probada la bebida de emigrar, polvo con andadito de araña, y tarde o temprano ella también emigra como estrella fugaz, como la esposa huyona, escapa del esqueleto en que le tocó estar fijamente por una vida, se va, no se queda, la carne también es "tecuna"... (pp.880-81)

It is surprising that more attention has not been given to these exalted speeches by the Curandero. The ideas behind the novel are less than remarkable (as is usually the case with novels), but Asturias is unfailingly ingenious in clothing them in new forms, and in weaving them together in such a way as to unify the successive episodes and themes. They are of course the basis of the emotions and questionings which have always been the subject of lyric poetry. Given the impasse reached by the Western world, Asturias concludes that the pantheistic belief-patterns of the Amerindian are most nearly suited to the problems posed by existence, though Hombres de maíz is far from constituting a return to the concept of the noble savage. The Indian cannot conceive of himself as separate from the group identity, nor can he see that the group is distinct from the land and all other components of his life. He is not therefore concerned with problems of individual destiny.

After the first stage of his enlightenment Nicho goes to live on the Atlantic coast, for otherwise he would be imprisoned for losing the mail. The conclusion of the novel proper is the meeting at long last of the almost forgotten Goyo Yic and María Tecún in a curious, deliberately flat scene, followed by Nicho's own meeting with the woman who was the basis of the legend which his own bitter experience had echoed. At this point two planes glide together: María Tecún as the stone on the mountainside and at the same time a shabby aging woman on the coast; Nicho as a coyote talking to the Curandero on the mountainside and at the same time a boatman rowing María Tecún back to the shore from the prison where Yic is detained. These two planes are then indissolubly united by the voice of the Curandero, who finally synthesises all that has gone before. In an affirmation which halts the passage of life itself (see above, page 172), he reveals that María Tecún is María la Lluvia. Here the roles of the female figure reach a synthesis moving from two directions. María Tecún and La Piojosa Grande are the same woman, María la Lluvia, recalling that in the Popol Vuh the men of maize call their newly created companions by the names of the rain, for both are beneficent. But the female is also in Asturias' conception the "tecuna", symbol of absence. The paradox of life itself is reflected in this dual role of the female figure:

Piedra de María Tecún, imagen de la ausencia,  
amor presente y alejándose... (p.797)

The woman is seen to represent the rain, which by definition is related to the heavens, and by extension to all that is transient and indefinable. Agua llovida is the mirror of the past, or communicant of vain hopes for the future. The male figure symbolises the earth and all that endures. Thus the functions of the sexes in the novel are divided in order to reflect the paradox in the

interdependence of the two opposing elements of the human condition, the body and the spirit. Gaspar Ilóm's son is the maize, born of the intimacy between sky and earth. An anthropological concept has been interpreted in practical psychological terms and then transmuted back into the basis for a novel. We have almost come full circle. The final step is brilliantly provided by the very brief Epilogue.

Nicho has never found his wife. His meeting with María Tecún was the culmination of a long search which had lost its point (though not its need for explanation) with the discovery that his wife had fallen down an open well. The European search for values is in vain, for the value of life is to be found simply in living. Nicho is left in charge of the Hotel King and its "sixteen thousand rats" the Mayas used sixteen thousand to mean "too many to count"), which we can probably assume to represent European civilization. Nicho is weighed down by age and knowledge:

Faros enloquecidos por los piquetazos de las zancudas y zancudos enloquecidos por la luz de los faros. Zancudos, moscos, mosquitos, jejenes... Al Señor Nicho se le fue huida la cara para el hombro, igual que el tacón de un zapato torcido. Los años. Peso y soledad de plomo. Arrugas en forma de herradura le sostenían a duras penas la quijada, hueso malévolo que le colgaba, le colgaba irremediabilmente. Moscas. Se le entraban a la boca. Escupirlas vivas. (p.922)

Goyo Yic and María Tecún return to Pisigüilito with all their children:

Volvieron, pues, a Pisigüilito. Horconear de nuevo para construir un rancho más grande, porque sus hijos casados tenían muchos hijos y todos se fueron a vivir con ellos. Lujo de hombres y lujo de mujeres, tener muchos hijos. Viejos, niños, hombres y mujeres, se volvían hormigas después de la cosecha, para acarrear el maíz, hormigas, hormigas, hormigas, hormigas... (p.923)

The contrast between the flies associated with Nicho and the ants to which Yic and family are likened needs no elabor-

ation. Professor Franco's suggestion that the Indians have been "reduced" to ants in a commercialised world is misleading,<sup>42</sup> as the proximity of the word "lujo" suggests, for the novel is not confined to the Indians: rather it contrasts the Ladino and Indian ways of life, ending as an affirmation of the latter.<sup>43</sup> The point is that Nicho, the reluctant representative of the landless, partly Westernised Indian, is reduced to the role of a disillusioned observer of life, whereas Goyo, far from suffering any kind of reduction, has become reunited with the land and the natural way of life that goes with it (hence his reacquaintance with María Tecún, a return to the "vida de sueño" of the opening). Fittingly, in a novel whose techniques are so close to those of poetry, the last line (quoted above) completes the final synthesis, bringing to the surface a theme which has been subtly suggested, but never fully conceptualised, from the very first page. Men are like ants, with an inbuilt system of instincts to carry them forward, but basically blind to wider purposes or meanings to their existence; the Indian way of life is perfectly adapted to this condition. The Indians prize children, for they are the only consoling luxury, in whom human beings can live on after death, rather than longing to perpetuate their own lives.

This last contrast between the results of two opposing concepts of existence is a return to the original conflict between Gaspar and the maiceros. The author has moved from a purely internal view of the collectively oriented Indian psychology to an external view which puts their life (and all human life) in its true perspective, a movement which has already been reflected structurally in the two stages

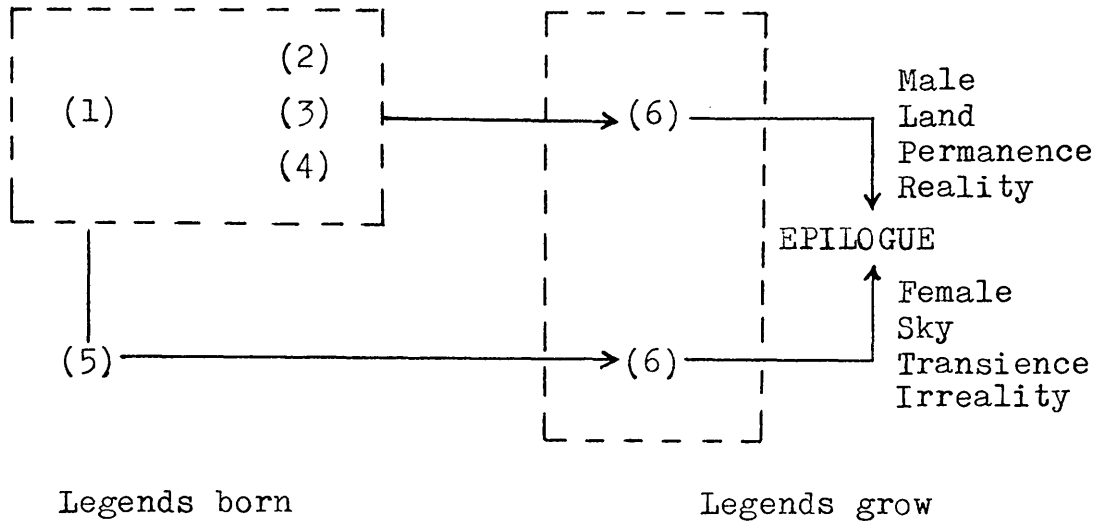
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42. The Modern Culture of Latin America, p.112

43. Sociologists have since interested themselves in the differences between the Indian and Ladino ethos. John Gillin, The Culture of Security in San Carlos:

illustrating the development of Indian legends: (1) the generalised essence of the legends of Parts I to V, where the characters had both a real and a symbolic function; (2) the effects of those legends upon a variety of individuals in Part VI.

We can now consider the structure of the novel in its broad entirety, which is more or less what we see below, the numbers in brackets referring to the six parts:



This structure is in a sense symphonic, with the successive statement, disappearance and re-emergence of themes, until all combinations have been resolved and harmonised, culminating in a final contrast and fusion of the two principal strands. The diagram traces only the main course of the two principal sets of polarities, the first grouped around the theme of the land, which stems essentially from Part I through Parts II, III and IV, and the second grouped around the temporal theme springing from Part I through Part V. Both currents give rise to legends and gradually unite over the length of Part VI, culminating in the synthesis of the Epilogue. The polarities in fact reproduce the Indian conception of phenomena as a series of dualities, based originally on the male-female correspondence. They conceived

the gods as two conflicting groups of spirits, those relating to the earth, associated with the maize, and those relating to the heavens and to water. Asturias has used these divisions to give peculiarly subtle depths to his allegorical struggle between spirit and matter, while the evolution of legends serves to trace a shifting line along the border between the real and the unreal.

With such a firm, and indeed almost "geometrical" structure, it may be thought that the novel has been harshly treated by critics. Though the reader has no need of such knowledge, the full complexity of Hombres de maíz is apparent only to those who come to it armed with an understanding of the thought of the Mayas and their modern descendants. We have tried to provide a satisfactory skeleton outline within which the intricate panels of this fictional bas-relief may be accurately fixed. Asturias has created this abstraction from a series of episodes with similar or parallel internal meanings. He could only have achieved this through the form of the lyrical novel. In all probability critics who have suggested that the novel is notable both for its brilliant use of language and its total absence of structural unity, have been misled by the dazzle of the former into overlooking the subtlety of the latter.



## CHAPTER V "MULATA DE TAL"

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There is no respectable critical approach to Mulata de tal. This is one of the reasons why so little has been written about it. Yet its importance for an understanding of Asturias' literary development is unmistakable. No critical attempt has been made to discuss the question of the pre-Columbian background to Asturias' fiction, which, despite certain interpretations relying on Greek and Babylonian mythology,<sup>1</sup> would seem the only sound approach. Indeed, as far as Mulata de tal is concerned, there can be no question at all that all the influences are largely pre-Columbian and wholly American. There are elements on almost every page which are familiar to those who have taken the trouble to acquaint themselves with the Popol Vuh, Anales de los xahil, or Libro de los libros de Chilam Balam. The difficulty lies in deciding exactly where each element comes from, what it represented to the Mayas (or, in the case of contemporary material, what it represents to their descendants), and what it now represents in the novel, that is, how it has been adapted to the requirements of the author's fictional form.

This problem would be a considerable one in Hombres de maíz, where no one has yet faced it. In Mulata de tal it may be said to be quite insurmountable, for various reasons: (1) There was considerable confusion among the Maya themselves, and much deliberate mystification on the part of their priests, which was facilitated by the over-

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1. R.J.Callan, "Fecundity in Two Novels of Miguel Angel Asturias" (Unpubd. diss, University of Saint Louis, 1965); "El tema de amor y de fertilidad en El Señor Presidente", Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos, no.214 (Oct 1967), pp.194-205; "Babylonian Mythology in El Señor Presidente", Hispania, L, 3 (Sept 1967), pp.417-24.

lapping and often contradictory significances of even their central symbols;<sup>2</sup> (2) There is little consensus of opinion among Maya scholars as to the broad outlines of Maya culture, still less its details; (3) Even when an evident reference to an identifiable cultural phenomenon is discovered, we can still not be sure, from a reading of the various authorities, that Asturias is using the material in any particular way, especially as he is known to mistrust the findings of many of the experts in the field; (4) Finally, there are simply too many elements in the novel. Asturias has worked in most of what he has learned about his native land, both before and since the Conquest. All this, though a considerable aid to his conception and execution of Mulata de tal, makes interpretation an extremely hazardous business. Just how hazardous is shown by Adelaida Lorand de Olazagasti's attempt to elucidate the significance of the Mulata herself whom, in one and the same paragraph, she sees first as a symbol of the contemporary "mentalidad híbrida de los indios de Guatemala", and then, apparently, as the purely Indian soul which existed before the Conquest, for she writes: "[La Mulata] quedó mutilada para siempre como el ser del indio."<sup>3</sup> Like all the other characters, the Mulata is in fact used by Asturias to represent many different things at different times, which is why a single, static interpretation is virtually impossible. Instead, we should shift our attention away from meaning to concentrate on method.

We suggest, therefore, that the best way into this novel is (1) to make a thorough study of the researches undertaken by the eminent Maya scholars; (2) to examine

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2. Even as high an authority as J.Eric S.Thompson has admitted, in Maya Hieroglyphic Writing, that there is no comprehensive work on the subject of Mayan religion, and that when interpreting Mayan thought, "there is too much danger of finding what one seeks."
  3. Adelaida Lorand de Olazagasti, "Mulata de tal", Aso-

especially the details that Asturias himself must have covered in studying under Raynaud in Paris in the 1920s, particularly when he collaborated in the translation into Spanish of the Popol Vuh and Anales de los xahil;<sup>4</sup> (3) more important still, to examine the broader attitude to reality that Asturias perceived behind the works of the Mayas (Chilam Balam being especially important in this respect); (4) finally, using all this material as a basis for an essentially intuitive approach to the background of the novel, to forego an ultimate interpretation as such, and seek a means of access which will allow us to avoid that hopelessly labyrinthine task. The aim of this chapter is to show that the real identity of Mulata de tal is hidden not in its subject matter, but, in so far as the two can be separated, in its language, which is also its method. The attempt to find one comprehensive interpretation would mean, inevitably, the abandonment of any attempt to delve into the real workings of a unique experiment in fiction.

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mante, XXIV, 3 (San Juan, Puerto Rico, Jul-Sept 1968), pp.68-79.

4. Much has been made of Asturias' Surrealist connections in the 1920s, but it has not been sufficiently realised that the Surrealists themselves were enthusiastic primitivists, and that many of Asturias' attitudes to reality and irreality crystallised as a result of working on the Mayan sacred books. He helped translate the Anales de los xahil from Raynaud's French, and it is interesting to note that at one point, when interpreting a magic act discussed in the text, Raynaud writes: "El hecho está en lo real, pero las frases del mago están en lo irreal." Asturias was evidently steeped in the question of irreality before he embarked on his literary career proper. On page 190 of the same edition (FCE, Mexico 1946), another Raynaud note gives the possible inspiration for the central theme of the concluding sections of Mulata de tal, when he writes: "Esta historia y la siguiente son de todos los tiempos y de todos los países... El cerebro humano varía poco para el mal, para el mal imbécil sobre todo, y la historia es un eterno recomenzar."

The subject of Mulata de tal, if it has one, is that of cultural conflict. To some extent this is an extension of the clash between Indian and Ladino in Hombres de maíz, but here the conflict is viewed simultaneously through all periods of Guatemalan history and at many levels of human experience. This requires a new narrative technique, and a move away from the method which had proved so successful artistically in El Señor Presidente and Hombres de maíz. In those novels the hecho central had been a situation whose point of reference outside the novel, however fragmented it might become inside it, was a single one and a real one. Its examination was carried out by means of a literary technique which converted the materials of fiction--plot, characters, scenes--into patterns of imagery. For Mulata de tal he now required to unite, on one literary plane, elements from a multitude of temporal, cultural and geographical realities. The continuous switching of these different temporal and cultural realities on to one single screen completely annuls historical perspective and all sense of reality as we know it. Mulata de tal becomes a fantasy, a wildly peripatetic fairy tale whose elements are the myths, legends and folk tales which have danced accompaniment to the development of culture in Guatemala since the Conquest.

We are concerned here to decide exactly how Asturias animates all these materials, and the solution he finds is what may be called his "cartoon technique". The function of metaphor in the two earlier works was to assume the role traditionally allotted to plot and character by acting as the true vehicle for the development of the novel. It unified an otherwise fragmentary narrative as it was unfolded, until a complete and meaningful pattern emerged. In Mulata de tal metaphor, and language in general, are used to give dynamic motion to the action, to fuse the heterogeneous elements we have mentioned into a homogeneous literary whole. Fragments now become a story, a series of dynamic situations, in contrast to El Señor Presidente and Hombres de maíz,

where a central situation, or hecho central, was fragmented into its suggestive nuclei and then expanded into a wider pattern. Mulata de tal has no plot or even characters as such, only a motion. It is this motion which is all-important.

The novel is composed of a series of cuentos, each with its own title. It represents the culmination of Asturias' development towards increasing stylisation over the last forty years. It gives a deformed picture of reality, as all Asturias' work does, but here the deformation is integrated and unified, and there is no single reality as a point of departure. We receive the vision already deformed, unlike El Señor Presidente, where part of the author's intention is to achieve, through constant juxtaposition, a simulation of the process of distortion as effected by the dictatorship. Although Mulata de tal rests on the assumption of a series of different realities, there is no one of them from which all the others derive, and so there are no implicit norms. Tierrapaulita is Tierrapaulita, not a distortion of some real city, and it exists only in Asturias' mind. His style is more than ever reminiscent of Valle-Inclán's esperpentos, but Valle-Inclán's literary creations move through frozen, static scenes. Asturias in Mulata de tal is emphasising the dynamic nature of cultural development through the ages. It is the difference between a strip cartoon in a newspaper, and an animated cartoon film in full colour. (From another point of view it is also the difference between aristocratic and popular art, but that is another matter). The result of the heterogeneity and the dynamism we have mentioned is a narrative of extraordinary flexibility. Mulata de tal is cellular. It is the possible links between elements, forged according to a kind of caricature of the laws of structural possibility that Levi-Strauss detects in cultural development, which determine the selection and ordering of events in the novel.

It is the only work where Asturias' innate tendency to rely on the suggestiveness of his elements alone reaches an extreme form.

The intention behind the conflict of culture traits reproduced in this novel is not to present us with a merely static vision of the Guatemalan version of the Latin American mestizo culture, but to show us how it evolved, to simulate somehow the process of acculturation in a dynamic and concentrated form. The mutual attraction and rejection between cultures takes form early in the novel, where it is dramatised in the strange Yumí-Catalina-Mulata triangle, itself a re-enactment of the ancient sexual struggle between sun and moon which is a constant of Middle American myth.<sup>5</sup> This inter-sexual struggle becomes superimposed upon the religious complexity of the conflict of the later parts, and the continuation of the sexual motif is a constant reminder that cultural change is not an abstract or isolated movement, but one carried on through human agents and in an organic fashion: this is why the novel seems to be cellular.

The theme of the mezcla de razas y culturas is materialised in a complex manner in numerous episodes throughout the novel. Many aspects of Maya religion seemed surprisingly familiar to early colonial Spaniards. The cross was an important sacred symbol, and there was even a system of baptism and confession. However, they tended to invest such things with the same meanings that they had in their own religion, which made it dangerously easy for the Indians to continue their old practices behind superficially adapted forms of Catholic worship. Landa,

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5. Thompson devotes a chapter to the moon in Hieroglyphic Writing which sheds much light on the mood of "moving tragedy" which she creates. See esp. pp. 230-31. See also Thompson's earlier study, "The Moon Goddess in Middle America", in Cont.Am.Anth. and Hist., no.29, 5: 12-73 (Washington, 1939)

for instance, described Indian puberty rites as "baptism", and churches were frequently built on the sites of old Maya temples, with the result that the Indians did not even need to change the locations of their rituals. Whatever the religion is that the Indians practise in Guatemala today, it is not Roman Catholicism, as the first priest in Mulata de tal himself remarks:

...siempre, aunque vengan a arrodillarse y a prender candelas, hacen armas en el bando de Cashtoc, diablo de esta tierra, hecho de esta tierra, fuego de esta tierra. (OE III, p.203)

The use of the military term is apt, for the priest is literally besieged by Indian pagan gods and demons, an ironic reversal of the time-honoured concept of the Spanish invaders as "conquerors".<sup>6</sup> The priest is reduced to using coconuts as containers to smuggle holy water into his church. Unfortunately, the earth devils swiftly convert these into what the good father himself describes as "algo femenino que no se [puede] ver sin pecar". At the sight of this diabolical trick his sacristan swings a machete at one of the coconuts, which immediately becomes a grisly image of John the Baptist's head. The action becomes confused, with the Indian Baile de los Gigantones the centre of attraction, whilst Mayan and Catholic rites and beliefs suggest episodes which weave in and out of the dancing, contributing new features to it as they unfold. The Baptist's head, itself summoned into the narrative by the theme of agua bendita, becomes the focus of a maze of sexual symbolism in which Salome is a sinuous palm tree with coconut breasts and leafy arms and fin-

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6. William Madsen, "Religious Syncretism", in Handbook of American Indians, Vol.VI (Univ. of Texas, Austin 1967), pp.369-91, remarks: "The Aztec abandoned pagan rites and fused their own religious beliefs with Catholicism, whereas the Maya retained paganism as the meaningful core of their religion, which became incremented with varying degrees of Catholicism." (p.370) Similarly, LaFarge suggests in Santa Eulalia that "the means by which a subordinated but vigorous culture yields, chan-

gers, as stars fall from the heavens trailing spermatozoal tails. The Baile de los Gigantones is a "big" dance, the essentially serious ritual which in Guatemala usually follows the comic and grotesque Baile Gracejo, of which the episodes involving Chiltic, La Huasanga and the Mono-Mosca were earlier examples. It is important to stress that the kinds of coalescence that Asturias invents are not merely arbitrary, but are precisely the kind of thing that has happened in Guatemala over the last four hundred years.

A similar example of the process of mezcla in action is the battle of wits between the second sacristan, Jerónimo de la Degollación de los Inocentes, and the pockmarked Indian who disingenuously picks up the glove thrown down by Father Chimalpín as a challenge to Satan. The episode is presumably suggested partly by the custom of trying to trick friends and relatives on the Día de los Inocentes (December 28th) with which Jerónimo's name is related, and partly by the similar Maya pastime of engaging in contests with the riddles and conundrums which their language so frequently suggested.<sup>7</sup> Jeronimo's role in this struggle is expanded to combine the Catholic practice of the confession of sins with the role of Tlazolteotl in pre-Columbian times. This deity was the Aztec-Maya goddess of filth and of confession, as well as of carnal love and sexual perversion, and the Mulata is Tlazolteotl in many of her aspects. In this scene she actually enters the person of the effeminate

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ges form, yet in the end captures the institutions of the dominant culture and molds them to its own pattern are well worth the scientist's attention."  
(p.148)

7. See Thompson, Hieroglyphic Writing, p.46: "The use of homophones (words with similar sounds but different meanings) seems to have been fairly general among the Mayas.. The Maya language, with its wealth of monosyllabic words and verbal roots was particularly well supplied with homophones."



Jerónimo, as a kind of succubus. The fictional vehicle used to effect the synthesis here is Jerónimo's effort to overcome the Indian in their battle of wits and words by imposing upon him an enactment of the service of the unmentionable bacinicarios of colonial times. The battle thereby develops into yet another violent sexual struggle in which the Indian defends his manhood by metamorphosing into a porcupine and sprouting multiple spines.

Of course, sex and religion were the most direct points of contact between conquerors and conquered in the sixteenth century, and sexual and religious attitudes still provide the most interesting examples of syncretism in Guatemala today. Asturias implicitly suggests that only too often the European innovations were not by any means an improvement upon their native equivalents, and many of the themes of the novel derive from a union of Asturias' own professed hatred of much of modern life, and the pathetic Indian protests against Spanish sexual and religious violence which are to be found in El libro de los libros de Chilam Balam and other sacred books of the Maya.<sup>8</sup> Without going any deeper into them, these examples should suffice to demonstrate that the complex and active mixture of cultures in the novel is effected by materialising a multitude of features into concrete episodes which involve violent encounters between Spanish and Indian culture contents. Both Maya and Spaniard saw the world in terms of conflict. The difference was that the latter saw themselves as soldiers of the Lord, whilst the Mayas viewed themselves as essentially helpless and insignificant spectators looking on at an endless and frequently catastrophic struggle be-

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8. See Adrián Recinos' translation of Chilam Balam, 3rd ed. (FCE, Mexico City 1965), especially the "Segunda rueda profética de un doblez de katunes", where much of the later part of Mulata de tal is concentrated, awaiting animation.

tween cosmic forces.<sup>9</sup> Even so, as we have seen, the Mayas nevertheless saw their deities in human terms, and this is the significance of the battle of the sexes which dominates the first part, and pervades the second. Now that we have examined Asturias' materials a little more closely, we can go on to discover how he integrates them all into a unified fictional form.

It is here that we come to our central question, the matter of cartoons. Perhaps we should now justify the comparison. Where better to start than the first paragraph of the novel? The first rollicking pages show Celestino Yumí swaggering with fluttering flies through an atmosphere full of the fun of the fair...

...que no era feria, sino furia de bienestares tempestuosos, ya que, aparte de cumplir con la iglesia y vender o mercar animales, abundaban los guarazos con amigos, los pleitistos hechos picadillo con machete o puyados con puñal, y la arri-madera de racimos de ojos encendidos a hembras tan rechulas, tetudas y de buena anca que más que abuso eran demasías de la naturaleza! (p.9)

It is nearly always the case with Asturias that the first paragraph in some way predicts the stylistic pattern of the whole, and the first paragraph of Mulata de tal is no exception. The feria-furia alliteration is an indication of the jarring syntax to be employed in the novel, and its violence is expanded in the further humorous allusion to the unfortunate "pleitistos hechos picadillo con machete o puyados con puñal". Asturias is here using his gifts of rhythm and invention for purely comic purposes, in contrast to anything he had attempted before. His love of popular culture is at last given full rein,<sup>10</sup> in a novel where Spanish picardía

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9. In Mulata de tal the Maya concept of evil is the non-ethical one of destruction by natural forces, whilst the R.C. concept of damnation through perversion provides a Western individualistic view.

10. For example, Asturias wrote an article on Cantinflas for El Imparcial, 8 June 1946, viewing him, not surprisingly, as a modern mago.

is largely substituted for the Indian ternura which was so important a feature of Hombres de maíz.

A humorous approach to violence is thus firmly established from the very start. The comic reduction of mache-te victims to picadillo, and puñal victims to puyados, is followed by a cartoon image in which bunches of blazing eyes loom above and around the substantial attractions of the not-so-gentle (being the tropics) sex. Vulgarly and eroticism, together with violence, set the tenor of the novel, but any offensiveness fades before the overpowering force of the language itself. Asturias' fundamental asset is still his primitive strength, which turns force of imagination into force of expression with the most natural ease. The combination here of crude naturalism and exotic fantasy is reminiscent of the wonders of a childhood visit to the zoo.

Given our parallel with the animated cartoon, and the heavy emphasis on sex and violence, and fertility, magic and religion in Asturias' novel, a series of remarks made by Brigid Brophy on the achievements of Walt Disney take on an interesting light:

The entire virtue of Mickey Mouse is his vigorous crudity. As a character, he is raucous; as a symbol, sublimely obvious. Rustic man made do with talismans merely phallic in shape. Mechanised man has acquired one that actually moves. He actually moves, what's more, in urgent spasms and jerks. The animation process, like the wit of synchronisation, is an erotic symbol in itself. (11)

The relevance of this to Mulata de tal is unmistakable, and Asturias' use of language to actualise the love-play of earthquake-creating giants, Jerónimo's encounter with the serpent-servant, or the priest's ride on the Mula Carnívora

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11. Brigid Brophy, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice", Sunday Times Magazine (London, 3 September 1967), p.20.

reproduces the jerkiness which characterises film cartoons. Miss Brophy continues:

In the animated cartoon, the magic of the talisman visibly works. Science makes magic come true... The cartoon dispenses with secondary elaboration and deals in the direct metaphors of unconscious fantasy... Disney used the very idiom of unconscious wishes to dramatise the wish implicit in all potency and fertility talismans: may Mickey, no matter how often flattened, clubbed and frustrated in his heroic or romantic aspirations, rise and move again. (12)

Without concerning ourselves with Miss Brophy's more exotic reflections, we can see that the world she is referring to is astonishingly similar to the one that Asturias has created in Mulata de tal, where sexual fantasies become the fluid agent uniting the two warring cultures.<sup>13</sup> The advantage of the animated cartoon film is that it can use every kind of visual style (as witness the recent Beetle cartoon, Yellow Submarine), and can actualise anything that the human mind can visualise. It is for this reason that Disney hit on the idea of using fairy stories for his cartoons. His own ultimate exercise in stylisation was the celebrated Fantasia, and Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings has now been scheduled for animation.<sup>14</sup> Asturias, in his novel, however, has almost prepared what the cartoonists call a storyboard, for he has already adapted his subjects to the demands of animation by dynamising them, and it is here that his originality lies.<sup>15</sup> In Mulata de tal we are shown hundreds of arms sprouting from a priest's body as he turns into a giant spider; the Mulata being magically

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12. Ibid, pp.20-22.

13. Asturias has informed me that no images in the novel were formed with Freud's theories in mind, but accepts they may well have been created in Freudian ways.

14. See "New Magic in Animation", Time (27 Dec 1968), 26-7.

15. The most useful work I have found on the technical aspects of animated cartoon films is R.Thomas, Walt Disney: The Art of Animation (New York, 1958).

put together again after the disintegration willed upon her by the vengeful earth devils; the sacristan trying vainly to make love to a prostitute who is also a serpent; and so on, on every page. Though obviously limited by language in a way that animators are not, Asturias manages to inject an extraordinary motion into his narrative by animating myths and legends into a swiftly flowing fairy tale. In the process his language becomes almost as plastic as the episodes themselves, as Jorge Campos has recognised:

En el fondo, lo que ocurre con esta novela es que Miguel Angel Asturias juega un poco con sus herramientas de trabajo. Con el lenguaje, al que deja escapar, correr, abarrocarse, deshumanizarse un tanto, para volver a atraillarlo a la realidad. Con el modo de ser y sentir de su pueblo, al que también caricaturiza y abarroca para hacerle más presente en su esencia sencilla y humana. (16)

The effect upon the characters is striking indeed: they are flexible, metamorphic, simplified. Almost all Asturias' characters are muñecos, but those in Mulata de tal are not caricatures of real people. When they speak it is the pueblo or even the language itself, abstracted, stylised, that is speaking, but not the characters. They perform human actions (though not all their actions are humanly possible), without being human. They are, in short, cartoon characters, which become simply elements in a seething turmoil of other elements, all of which have their own existence (the Maya considered that all things had "souls", and that they "possessed" the place in which they were located). Animals and plants become humanised and exist upon the same level as the "human" characters themselves. The tiny fig-

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16. Jorge Campos, "Lenguaje, mito y realidad en Miguel Angel Asturias", Insula, XXIII, no.253 (Madrid, Jan 1968), p.11. Campos quotes Asturias himself as saying that Mulata de tal is "una especie de picaresca verbal, con el ingenio y la fantasía que tiene la gente sencilla para hilar frases y jugar con las ideas."

ures which flit dynamically across the pages of Mulata de tal belong to no one reality. They live in an autonomous world where legends get up and walk, and after the novel has been put down they continue to buzz around the reader's startled imagination.

This was foreshadowed in the 1930s, when Asturias' literary activities were otherwise more or less at a standstill, by his creation of the fantomimas (the pun is typical), poem-dramas where words themselves are the ghostly actors in a weird, often chilling world of language. Similarly, in Mulata de tal, the characters are autonomous, episodes grow, swell and merge into one another in a primitive cellular world where the missing link is repeatedly provided by the author's own unfailing ingenuity with language. The whole novel is a turmoil of warring elements struggling for survival, and can be viewed as a battle for the soul of the Guatemalan people over the centuries. It should not be forgotten that almost all animated cartoons are principally concerned with conflict, and many of the best known regulars, such as Popeye and Tom and Jerry, deal in nothing else.

We shall begin with the backcloth. Cartoon backgrounds are highly distinctive. The view of Quiavicús as Yumí returns from his misdeeds at the fair will be familiar to anyone who has ever seen an animated cartoon:

...Quiavicús, aldea que coronaba un monte,  
como la emplomadura de una muela. (p.12)

Similarly stylised and simplified long shots are given as the Sacristan hurries back to Tierrapaulita after deceiving Cal-Cuj, Devourer of Heads, with a false offering:

El sacristan bajaba al trote de cerros que después de las quemas semejaban lomos de inmensos monos de pelo de oro quemado.

-¡Tierrapaulita!... -grita al contemplar a sus pies la ciudad caída del cielo como una dentadura vieja. (p.224)

The image comparing the fire-scarred mountainsides with the backs of enormous monkeys echoes the recent incident between the Sacristan and the shaman who stuck his severed arm back on to his body with monkey's saliva. The unspoken identification of creatures appearing in the narrative with the background is a frequent device which adds to the air of magic which pervades the novel. Laws of nature are ignored or misapplied, and the fusion of foreground and backcloth produces an impression of dense possibility. The background again harmonises with the action as Yumí makes his way down through the forest to the river to make his pact with Tazol, Devil of the Maize Leaves, at the beginning of the novel:

En la tiniebla azulosa, en medio del silencio que el río lejano convertía en traqueteo de vértebras líquidas, Celestino Yumí soltó la lengua y saludó... (p.17) Los troncos de los árboles retorcidos, que no crecen, sino reptan en la altura, se estiraron como culebrones verdosos, cascarrudos y por dónde, no se sabe, desapareció Tazol, dejando a Celestino Yumí con su tristeza y su machete. (p.19)

The episode in which the now wealthy Yumí's peons pursue his tyrannical spouse will begin to show us how action and background converge in cartoon images. Tazol has rewarded Yumí by filling his granaries with burning gold instead of ears of maize, but the peons are much more concerned with the Mulata:

...los peones acudían a querer apagar el fuego a guacalazos de agua, aquel resplandor rubicundo que emanaba de las trojes llenas de olotes, fosforescente, hidrogenado, inflamándose en el verdor pantanoso de la madrugada. (pp.65-6) Por el espejo azuloso del aire, las manos de los peones, de los mayordomos y los mozos, con desprecio del metal áureo, perseguían a la mulata desnuda, como a una aparición de piedra viva. No respiraban. No parpadeaban. Las tijeras de las piernas de aquélla, los cortaban en pedazos. Eran pedazos de hombre los que la seguían, mientras ella, eléctrica, atmosférica, bailaba igual que una luz fatua. (p.66)

Finally, we might look at another form of background stylisation, in which firm outlines and contours, in contrast to the usual blending of foreground and backcloth, make a sharp distinction between absolute stillness and flowing motion:

...el río de encías de arena, inmensos dientes de piedra y lengua líquida de espejo en fuga. (p.32)

Moving to the foreground, we shall begin by showing some close-ups. Asturias has always tended to caricature his figures by simplifying them through comparison with suitable static objects, but here he dynamises the process. Timoteo Teo Timoteo was the richest man in Quiavicús until Yumí made his secret pact with Tazol:

...apenas escondía su gran envidia, la boca apretada para exprimir una sonrisa amarga. (p.62)

The psychological detail, envy, is externalised in a facial expression, and this is typical of Asturias' pictorial approach to the novel. In a more rapid and slightly more distant, Chaplinesque vision, Father Chimalpín hurries into the church:

El Padre hizo notar que se acercaba. Ruido de badajo el de sus piernas y sus pies, bajo la campana de la sotana. (p.269)

His predecessor yawns:

...soltando un bostezo que antojó recogerlo en el hueco de su mano y ponérselo como bone-  
te. (p.256)

Or shuts his ears to sinful talk:

El clérigo se llevó las manos a las orejas heladas y se las aplastó como si fueran dos sapos. ¡No oír! ¡Dios mío, no oír! (p.190)

Asturias later shows us a little deer blinking. No one will believe he has not seen Disney's Bambi:

Y sí que era preciosa la garganta del venado que parpadeó, dos, tres aletazos amarillos



sobre los pepitones negros, brillantes, de sus saltadas pupilas. (p.369)

It will be noticed that these examples generally involve giving extra speed or violence to familiar movements (the priest shutting his ears; eyes blinking compared to delicate wing-beats); giving extra rhythm to a movement (the priest as a bell); or lending concrete reality to intangibles (the sight of a vinegary smile being pressed out of a face, or a yawn which can be held in the hand or worn like a bonnet). Humour resides here in the visual effects of the language itself.

Condensation has always been a part of Asturias' art. Cartoons rely on immediacy of impact for their visual jokes (what animators call "takes"), or on a rapid juxtaposition of incongruities. Asturias similarly manages to show us that Yumí is too big for his willing little horse in very few words (nine, to be precise), as they return together from San Martín Chile Verde, the scene of Yumí's disgraceful exhibitionism:

Y así volvió de la Feria de San Martín Chile Verde, en un caballo que parecía salir de su bragueta abierta, su caballito ganoso, clinudo y con los cascos como tacones de zapatos viejos. (p.11)

This is implicitly a frontal view, and most of Asturias' writing in this novel presents the reader with a definite scenic vantage point. So far our examples have involved what we might call a static camera angle, showing movement within a fixed scene. When the action demands movement into or away from the scene we get what cartoonists call a trucking shot:

El sacristán empezó a pasearse por la tiniebla pegajosa de la noche húmeda, en espera del Padre que, de espaldas, paso a paso, para que nadie notara en la plaza que había hecho mutis del baile de los Gigantes, el seguía diciendo así, Gigantes, se metió en la iglesia, y apenas estuvo dentro se soltaron sobre las puertas de pesadas maderas, cerrojos y trancas y más cerrojos y más trancas. (p.201)

Safely inside the church, the priest and the sacristan snatch a quick smoke to give them courage in their struggle against the earth devils, after which the narrative eye pans across the scene with them as they change location:

El humo regado en sus ropas y sus caras parecía unirlos, y con eso como que el cura cobró valor y tomando dos tinajas, el sacristán llevaría una y el hachón de ocote, salieron al corredor de la casa conventual, donde estaban los cocos, regados en el piso. (pp.202-203)

All these illustrations combine to show that Asturias is "seeing" his subject matter in a special way, and in terms of scenes. Usually the action itself is ideally suited to cartoon treatment: a bear licking at flames; a cat licking itself clean with the light from open windows; blackened trees, all eyes, jeering at a woodcutter; a little devil skating on centipedes; or a fight between the same baby demon and a monkey which disperses into a swarm of flies whenever it is struck at.

What Asturias is adding to the basic cartoon situation, however, is a new and fluid motion which will animate it, as in the following passage where the Mulata ejects her teeth, which are then swallowed by a toad, who alone can tell her how to recover her lost femaleness:

...tan pronto escupió incisivos y colmillos, le salieron otros que también escupió, a la espera de los que de nuevo le llenaban las encías que también escupió. Sus dientes formaron montoncitos de risa. El sapo abrió su inmensa boca en medialuna y probó aquel maíz de risa, grano por grano lo fue comiendo, para luego devolverlo en silencioso vómito. ¿Maíces?... ¡No! Calaveritas minúsculas de hueso. La mulata no esperó razón. En un santiamén, con la mano que era de ella, colocóse en las encías de nuevo sus dientes, calaveritas de hueso blanco con lustre de marfil, y en viendo al sapo alargarse y encogerse para seguir adelante, soltó su primera carcajada de calaveras, carcajada que abrió una de las puertas gigantes que daba sobre los grandes patios. (p.356)

A number of different devices--repetition, interrupted syntax, metamorphosis through metaphor (dientes; montoncitos de risa; granos de maíz; calaveritas de hueso), and a dynamic representation of movement, culminating in the vision of the door bursting open with the Mulata's laughter--all help to turn this into a cartoon scene.

Asturias was already experimenting with the dynamics of language when he wrote El Señor Presidente thirty years before, as in the scene where Lucio Vásquez fears he is going to be late for a date in a bar (my italics):

Al despedirse de Rodas se disparó Lucio Vásquez--que pies le faltaban--hacia donde la Masacuata, a ver si aun era tiempo que echar una manita en el rapto de la niña, y pasó que se hacía pedazos por la Pila de la Merced... y de un solo paso, ese último paso que se va de los pies como conejo, clavóse en la puerta del fondín. (OE I, pp.261-62)

A similar image hastens the Auditor's carriage around the corner:

El Auditor saltó al carricoche seguido de un oficial. Humo se hizo el vehículo en la primera esquina. (OE I, pp.292-93)

The frantic pace of these scenes simulates the speed and violence which strip cartoon words such as "whoosh!", "pow!", "bam!", "zoom!" and "whizz!" were intended to suggest. The method has been developed into a system for Mulata de tal, whose very essence, as we have argued, is to actualise the dynamics of cultural change in an apparently simple, because immediate, form. Added to the sex and violence is an implicit humour which comes out clearly in the vision of the hapless priest charging about the town on the Mula Carnívora:

"¡Sacristán, dónde están... dónde están... las campanas dónde están!...", eso iba gritando el Padrecito al tiempo que la mula saltaba y en el aire se golpeaba los cascos de las patas produciendo un tan, tan, tan, ... que ella también parecía preguntarle... "¡Sacristán... sacristán... las campanas, ¿dónde están? (p.401)

Finally, as the novel culminates in what is literally an orgasm of cosmic catastrophe, it is fitting that in our last example we should watch Jerónimo himself staggering through the ruins of Tierrapaulita in the midst of a violent earthquake:

...entre casas derrumbadas... algunas de dos pisos... casas de dos pisos que se sentaban, se quedaban de un piso, avanzaba, le parecía que avanzaba, pero más bien retrocedía, Jerónimo, bamboleándose al compás de los edificios que se separaban de ellos mismos, se iban, se iban de su centro de gravedad, y de golpe regresaban...  
(p.397)

No writer of Spanish prose has ever had greater mastery of its rhythms, and Asturias' constant tendency to unite form and subject matter here finds complete expression. The to-and-fro organisation of the syntax, especially the perfect collocation of "Jerónimo", combined with the frivolous vision of the houses "sitting down", gives the passage a unique force and motion.

It is sufficiently obvious that the whole art of this novel rests upon its language. In general, Asturias matches the visual freedom of the cartoon by using every resource that the Spanish language offers him. His use of colour is striking and immeasurably more liberal than in earlier novels, and alliteration (remembering "Mickey Mouse" and "Donald Duck") is used frequently and cunningly as in the vision of the mule on which the old priest flees from Tierrapaulita:

...una mula prieta de ojos rojos como rábanos.

The diabolical contrast wherein the mule's red eyes blaze out from its black body jolts into the ojos-rojos-(como) rhyme, and then into the rojos-rábanos alliteration, creating a unified picture which reproduces the spasmodic motion of the animated process.

Sounds are reproduced by the constant use of onomatopoeia, which Asturias has always exploited: none of his no-

vels is considered right until he has read it through to himself and approved its sounds and rhythms. There is also a constant flow of Joycean word-games and puns, many of them extremely vulgar, which accompany the flexible and rapid action with an equally rapid display of popular humour. Examples would be superfluous. In short, Asturias does virtually everything it is possible to do with the Spanish language, within the demands of his fictional purpose, and one might question whether the Spanish of the mother country could have achieved a novel like this, any more than it could have achieved the prose of Darío's Azul in 1888. At sentence level the writer's personal imprint is equally striking, and almost all our examples have incidentally illustrated his original approach to syntax. Many of the sentences are extremely long,<sup>17</sup> uniting different scenes and characters in the same fluid way that the narrative as a whole contrives to do, and thereby achieving the homogeneity of the cartoon in every cell of the novel.

Asturias' long sentences first complicate and then unravel highly rhythmical and elastic coils of language. He tends towards a systematic frustration of normal syntactical patterns, replacing these by a new pattern dependent upon seemingly endless sentences with clauses either intricately dove-tailed into one another to produce a jerking effect...

A dar el salto iba, cuando el pajarraco picoteó la sogá, de donde sacó fuerzas si era tan viejo, tan velozmente que en pocos segundos deshilachó el cordel. (pp.41-2)

...or strung out in looping chains to give a sense of effortless fluidity. Thus the pronounced emphasis on action and movement--the number of incidents on each page, and of verbs in even short sentences is remarkable--is reinforced by the powerful ebb and flow of the language itself.

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17. I have counted some of them: page 11, 180 words; pages 31-2, 151 words; pages 54-5, 168 words; and pages 251-52, 403 words. There are many others.

Language itself, in short, is the real hero of Mulata de tal, where recurrent references to the power of the word remind us of the sacred role attributed to it in all primitive cultures:

Todos poseemos en la garganta el sonido embrujador, el que puede producir los encantamientos, ...aquellos sonidos llamados a romper las leyes naturales por el milagro, porque todo poder está en la palabra, en el sonido de la palabra. (p.142)

Asturias is here expressing the same wonder that all primitive peoples have felt when confronted by the power of the word, and modern literature has rediscovered this sense of wonder and magic. Everywhere in the Mayan sacred books--and in Mulata de tal--we find admiration at the mysterious relation between life and thought and the material world. The word seems to live in man's throat, buried in muscle and sinew, just as spirits dwell in the trees, rivers and mountains, yet it somehow controls all that exists, or can be imagined to exist. Word and soul are one. Despite such mystification, and his repeated attacks upon science and "progress", Asturias' effects are more directly produced by carefully prepared, purely linguistic devices than those of any other Latin American writer: whether he knows it or not.

The critical procedure in this chapter has departed from that applied to El Señor Presidente and Hombres de maíz, because the novel itself is of a different nature, and what was needed was a key to its method, not an analysis of its completed pattern. There has been no attempt to exhaust the indeed inexhaustible aspects of the work, nor to probe deeply into the linguistic techniques as such: that is a job for a specialist. The purpose has been to provide a context or frame of reference within which to view a novel which all too many readers find unmanageable. Mulata de tal provides a unique literary experience, and all that is needed to appreciate it is the right lens.

## IN CONCLUSION

This study really had two essential objectives, both outlined in the first two chapters. One was to undertake a task which had hitherto been neglected, namely that of trying to produce coherent studies of each of Miguel Angel Asturias' three major non-committed novels, El Señor Presidente, Hombres de maíz, and Mulata de tal. The second was to draw more general conclusions about Asturias' literary techniques as a whole, and to relate him to the Latin American literature of his time. The extent of the neglect in which his work has languished is difficult to explain, though some answers are easily found: (1) The intrinsic difficulty of his novels; (2) Asturias was, in some ways, in advance of his contemporaries as a writer; (3) He is not himself a literary theorist, and is not prepared to act either as critic of his own fiction or as its propagandist; (4) Guatemala is a small, obscure country; (5) Asturias is the object of much resentment and not a little jealousy.

It is clear that Asturias is at heart a writer in the line of Flaubert, Joyce, and Virginia Woolf, with much in common with the nouveau roman of recent years. He is, in other words, more concerned in the last analysis with the finished product, the completed work of art, than with its subject matter. But that is merely to say that without a close concern for form no subject matter is raised to artistic dignity. Asturias' achievement is to have produced novels whose intensity and depth of emotion does not derive from any of the various forms of fiction grouped under the name of "realism", though it is those forms which are generally accepted as having the advantage in that quarter. He has found a way of relating individuals to collective consciousness in a direct and meaningful mann-

er within an artistic conception of the novel. In so doing he has achieved what no other writer of fiction in Latin America achieved before him: he has absorbed the multiple lessons of the vanguardista movements of the first quarter of this century and has transferred them to the novel. He has successfully employed poetic techniques in fiction, but within a coherent and systematic artistic intention. Poetry is used not to adorn and refine (Modernism), but to sharpen and intensify.

Asturias has frequently been censured for his lack of artistic discipline, and it has been taken for granted that his novels, however brilliant linguistically, were ill-planned, poorly constructed edifices. Yet it would be hard to find a novelist whose works were in fact more carefully conceived and executed, as this study has attempted to show. Compared to such works as Adán Buenosayres, La región más transparente, Sobre héroes y tumbas, or Paradiso, which take the reader by storm, overwhelming him by sheer weight of words and by a succession of cataclysmic metaphysical situations, Asturias' novels may seem minutely chiselled. Even the self-creating Mulata de tal obeys a stricter conception than any of those novels, because of the care with which each word, each sentence, is conceived. Asturias' novels grow as organisms do: not only on the basis of some abstract philosophical idea, or the logic of sociology, psychology or history, but also according to the inner logic of the novel itself, of language itself. The novel and the world, language and life, join and evolve together.

The novels for which Asturias will be remembered are El Señor Presidente and Hombres de maíz, in which two literary forms, the poem and the narrative, are perfectly meshed together. Mulata de tal is pure narrative, an example of the nueva novela. Asturias finds ways of moulding old themes--good and evil, reality and irreality--to new conceptions, such as the collective unconscious and individual consciousness. To exploit the discoveries of the psychoanalysts



in fiction there had to be a departure from the traditional attitudes to prose and the naturalist-realist depiction of social or individual situations. Freud and Jung revealed that metaphor and symbol were not agreeable luxuries in human existence, but essential modes of thought, ways of expressing human contents which would not otherwise find an outlet. No writer has perceived the implications of this for the novelist more clearly than Asturias. No writer has made a more systematic presentation of the relation of individual actions to the deeper sources of life, thereby providing a transcendence otherwise lacking, one attained not by moving forwards into some future paradise, but back. This is why, in an age dominated critically and academically by the social sciences, Asturias' novels are destined for a triumphant reassessment.

The technical resources which enable Asturias to establish these individual-collective relationships are, firstly, a studied use of language, language as criticism, as discovery. There are no scientific, philosophical or socio-political discussions in any of the three novels in question here. In El Señor Presidente and Hombres de maíz language itself "discusses" (analyses, evaluates, dissects) as well as narrating in every line, and there is no place for discussion scenes as such. This is not exactly the case with Mulata de tal. There is not in that novel an hecho central on the real plane which can be fragmented and investigated through language. In Mulata de tal Asturias attempts something of even more contemporary interest, something even more spectacular. He attempts to represent, through language, the process of acculturation. He therefore dehumanises his novel in an effort to abstract culture contents which then do battle on an abstract screen called Guatemala.

In Hombres de maíz and El Señor Presidente he probes deep within, on a synchronic dimension. The novels are static, like tapestries unrolling, offering the satisfaction

of promised symmetry achieved. They use sensation scalpel-wise, as Virginia Woolf does, not to bludgeon the reader, not to overwhelm his intellect with emotion, but for specific, carefully prepared effects.<sup>1</sup> Mulata de tal is dynamic, diachronic. It has no descriptions of physical feelings at all (though not for the reasons urged by M. Robbe-Grillet), in sharp contrast with the other two novels. There are occasional references to simple emotions, as of course there must be to keep any action going, but there is no accent on sensation at all, a quite extraordinary fact in view of the nature of the two earlier works. Like a cartoon film, it explains itself visually and dramatically through externals, providing a unique answer to the problems posed by the need for excessive conceptualisation to express the process of acculturation. It is no doubt because no one would have expected a novel to dramatise a subject matter regarded as the exclusive preserve of the social anthropologist that the significance of Mulata de tal has escaped critics up to now. In Mulata de tal the method really is the meaning; the medium really is the message.

This is true also of Asturias' two earlier novels, but in a slightly different sense. Again, the conception of each novel determines not only the overall structure, as is to be expected, but the very texture of the narrative itself. Asturias will not allow his readers to stop and reflect a while: they are always held close to the moment at hand, to the twists and turns of language. Nevertheless, within each cell of the narrative the whole is at once reflected (microcosm) and under construction (macrocosm). Language both builds and fragments, evokes and analyses, at one and the same time. In treating his hecho central Asturias builds up a picture of the human mind,

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1. A very good and apt example is the operation performed on Goyo Yic by Chigüichón Culebro in Part V of Hombres de maíz.

not by speaking about it in the way that novelists "speak", but by revealing its structure and workings through language itself. Asturias, as his articles and interviews witness, is not at his best when talking in general terms, because he simply cannot make sharp distinctions between theory and practice. He sees situations whole. Philosophical concerns are buried deep in all he writes; yet he would be very hard put to usefully discuss any strictly abstract question.

This apparent limitation is Asturias' greatest strength as a writer, and provides one more example of what it is that great writers have that philosophers, scientists, psychologists, sociologists and, not least, literary critics, do not have. These latter are essentially autopsists, not creators. Asturias is able instinctively and quite spontaneously to discern relations in life and relations in language, and to produce a synthesis of the two which satisfies the demands both of art and of reality. Thus it should be clear that the relation of style to structure is a very close one in his work. In El Señor Presidente and Hombres de maíz the real-unreal distinction established by language is a reflection of the conscious-unconscious division in the human psyche. This gives both novels a very distinctive overall shape or structure. In El Señor Presidente Cara de Angel is the receptacle of all the major themes, and the fulcrum of characterisation, whilst the President represents the obscurity of unconsciousness, with the collective unconscious within each individual as the "past" in which he resides. The themes flow through Cara de Angel and are fixed and frozen by the pattern of the culminating chapters, as the plot takes on a metaphorical significance. In Hombres de maíz Part VI assumes Cara de Angel's role as the pool into which the earlier themes flow, a kind of mirror of Indian consciousness which externalises the collective consciousness evoked in the first half of the novel. In it the modern Indians see a reflection of their own face. Within this

the development of Hilario on the level of consciousness, and of Nicho penetrating into the unconscious, establishes a pattern which finally fixes the overall structure of the novel.

Both novels therefore create pools of consciousness and use certain strategic characters on a sliding scale system, with the differences explicable in terms of the varying subject matter and objectives, particularly the relation of Cara de Angel to an individual understanding of existence, and the examination of collective reality in Part VI of Hombres de maíz. The novels have exactly the same conception, but seen from opposite points of view. Both take their inner meaning from the relation between consciousness and unconsciousness (reality-irreality, day-night, prose-poetry). Both in other words create and work within a psychic construct representative of their differing but comparable realities. El Señor Presidente is concerned with the city and with an essentially European conception of the world. It is determined by individual points of view, by an absence of collective consciousness, but the sum of the individual unconsciousnesses provides this within one composite psyche (an unspoken Everyman) built up throughout. Hombres de maíz provides a similar vision of the campo and the world of the Indian. Consciousness is most important in the second half, whose subject matter is initially the indio ladinizado, whereas the first half showed the primitive, unconscious world of the indio puro. Thus where in El Señor Presidente a collective human psyche is constructed from a succession of individuals, in Hombres de maíz collective consciousness gives each of the characters an orientation until they turn their backs on it.

By comparison Mulata de tal is a novel not for the psychoanalysts, but for the social anthropologist, and Asturias varies his technique accordingly. Events take place not within men, but through time. El Señor Presidente and

Hombres de maíz have movement, but within dimensions which are fixed from the outset by the range of potential of the hecho central, or, more precisely, of the psychic construct built around, or into, that hecho central. Each of those two novels builds a mind, while Mulata de tal builds a culture, the syncretic culture which has evolved as a result of the clash of those two minds through the ages.

Looking at Asturias' trajectory one might say that in the 1920s and 30s he was preoccupied with the culture of his own country from inside, in much the same way that the 1898 Generation had been concerned with Spain: hence the Genesis of the Leyendas de Guatemala, and the two evoking-and-analysing novels on city and country in El Señor Presidente and Hombres de maíz, which examine the essence of Guatemala and its spiritual and social defects. By the 1940s and 50s Asturias was himself a diplomat, and was much more concerned with the outrages wrought upon Guatemala from outside. This produces the Trilogía bananera and Weekend en Guatemala (1950-60). The 1960s see an older, perhaps wiser Asturias produce Mulata de tal, the stories of El espejo de Lida Sal, and Maladrón, works in which the outrages committed this century by the United States merge into the outrages of the earlier imperialists, the conquistadores, in what Asturias himself calls the change from imperio to emporio. Asturias seems to have realised from bitter experience that there are some definitive battles writers can win, whereas politicians by the very nature of things never achieve permanent victories. The passage of time and his own continuing researches into the history of the pre-Columbian civilisations of Central America, plus a long series of violent and often unjust political attacks against himself, have perhaps taught him something of the vanity of human aspirations. At any rate one can see a movement from individual anguish (El Señor Presidente) through collective resignation (Hombres de maíz) to a kind of god-like detachment (Mulata de tal).

Chapter I discussed Asturias' rejection by most of the exponents of the nueva novela latinoamericana. The present study was written on the assumption that until the works which are Asturias' greatest claim to fame were subjected to comprehensive scrutiny, this rejection would not be a valid one. Now that an initial scrutiny has been made it is suggested that the rejection is not valid at all. Mario Vargas Llosa, one of the leading younger writers of the new generation, has frequently expressed a vision of the nueva novela which is amply representative of that of most of his fellow writers, as also of critics such as Rodríguez Monegal. Vargas Llosa affirms that the fundamental difference between a great novel and a mediocre one, that is, between earlier novels and some of those recently written, or currently being written, is their "tratamiento", which in turn produces "una estructura, un lenguaje, o sea, una forma."<sup>2</sup> "Los nuevos novelistas", he continues, "más que inventores de historias, son inventores de lenguajes, de técnicas... El lenguaje ha llegado a ser el tema mismo, la materia misma." This is not all: "La presencia del elemento fantástico o mágico es lo que diferencia la nueva novela de la anterior. Los límites de demarcación entre el mundo real-objetivo y el mundo "real"-subjetivo han desaparecido." This, he concludes, is the "gran revolución de la nueva novela."

One can only be amazed at how neatly Asturias fits this pattern of characteristics which, according to Vargas Llosa, are the central features of the triumphant new novel. Indeed, they make a much better description of Asturias' defining characteristics than of those of Vargas Llosa himself. Nevertheless Vargas Llosa fails to mention Asturias even once, despite his search into the past for precursors

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2. From the text of a public lecture entitled "The Contemporary Latin American Novel", given at the University of Southampton, 22nd January 1970.

as far as Rulfo's El llano en llamas. This contrasts notably with an occasion three years ago, in May 1967, at King's College, London, when Miguel Angel Asturias was the speaker and Vargas Llosa was in the audience. On that occasion the younger writer heard the old man praise his work in glowing terms. The reasons for the curtain of silence drawn around Asturias since the Nobel award are extremely complex, and would make a fascinating study, though unfortunately of the kind that can only decently be made half a century later. Whatever the critics or the other writers may think of the value of Asturias' novels as novels, it seems impossible to deny his prophetic role as far as language and technique are concerned, simply because the characteristics most frequently attributed to the nueva novela apply perhaps more directly to Asturias (and did so over twenty years ago) than to any of the new novelists.

There has been a great deal of critical talk about Asturias, but very little critical action. All critics to date have attempted to draw conclusions about his work without having embarked on the long and arduous task of truly understanding what his novels are and how his effects are achieved. Vague generalisations from individual works to movements and literary history as a whole are dubious at the best of times, and quite useless when, as here, the details have not been adequately examined. No leading critic has made a major study of Asturias' fiction and no more than a handful of minor studies have been made, few of them other than marginal. Not a single writer to date has made a serious study of the Indian background to his novels, nor of his political career, nor of the events of Guatemalan history which induced him to write the Trilogía bananera and Weekend en Guatemala.

Only El Señor Presidente has received more than passing attention. Hombres de maíz and Mulata de tal, both

outstanding novels, remain virtually unexamined three years after their author was awarded the Nobel Prize. Clearly, everything remains to be done. The present study has been in one sense extremely limited: it confines itself to the problem of fictional method, and seeks only to reveal the unity of form and subject matter in Asturias' three artistic novels. However, this may be considered a not unambitious task when it is remembered that nothing along these lines has yet been done, and that no close textual analysis of any of Asturias' novels has been undertaken. Evidently this approach had first to be made before any of the wider issues could successfully be discussed. The fact that such wider issues had already been discussed in Asturias' case for over twenty years, without any concern for details, is a reflection of the state of criticism in general where Latin American literature is concerned. It must be hoped that a serious and fruitful reassessment will soon begin. Once some kind of concensus has been reached the historian, the linguist and the social anthropologist will also be found to have much to say about Asturias. But the literary critics must rediscover him first.



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